



THEOLOGY AND CREED IN SUNNI ISLAM

THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD, ASH'ARISM,
AND POLITICAL SUNNISM

JEFFRY R. HALVERSON



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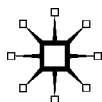
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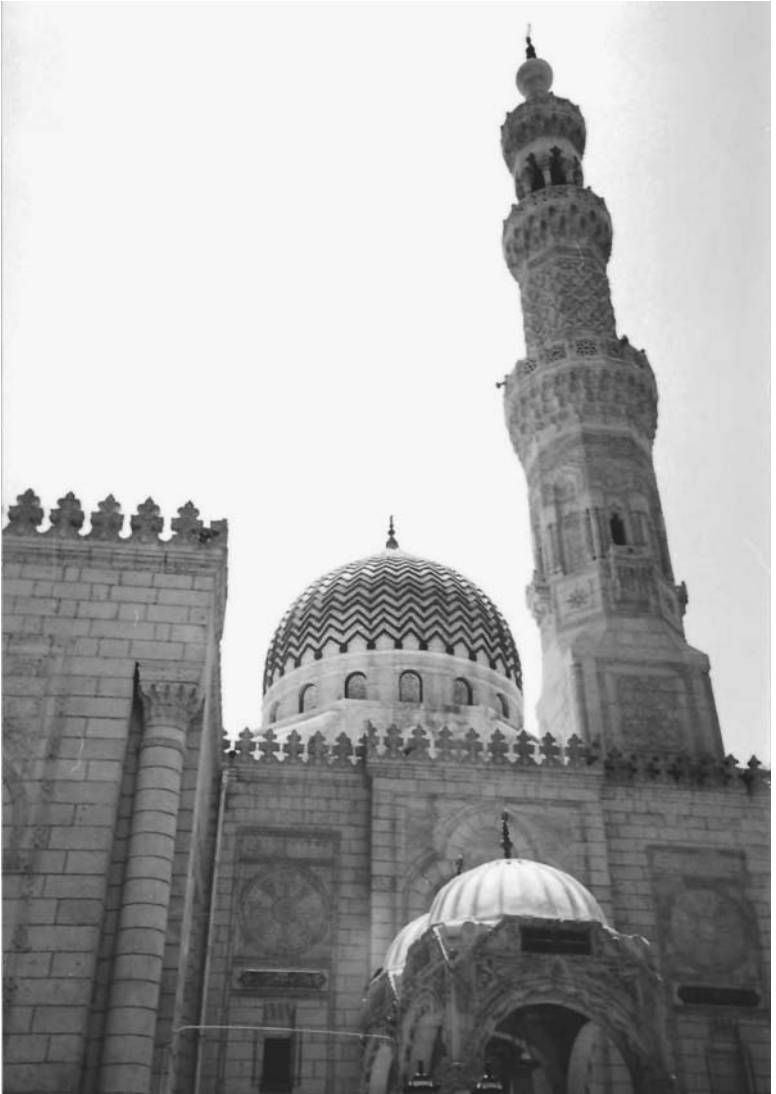
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The Sayyida Zaynab Mosque in Cairo, Egypt.

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INTRODUCTION

The Unthinkable

In his important study *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*, the Algerian-born intellectual Mohammed Arkoun described the notion of the “unthinkable” in Islamic thought, referring to the expansive realm of the unquestionable, axiomatic, and intellectually forbidden.¹ In recent decades, this realm has been greatly fortified. But prior to this, among the premodern intellectual and creative casualties of the unthinkable, there was a most surprising fatality, the discipline of Islamic theology, known as *‘ilm al-kalam* (“the science of discourse”). Through a complex confluence of events and popular rebuke, *kalam* fell into steady decline during the waning of the ‘Abbasid Caliphate and then into virtual extinction as an active discipline by the fifteenth century (CE), replaced by a distinctly creedal enterprise. Yet, even in its absence, virtually every aspect of Islamic thought has continued to operate under a set of implicit theological postulates that, in turn, dictate and define the parameters of all ensuing discourse. As legal scholar Wael B. Hallaq noted in his work *A History of Islamic Legal Theories*: “[Islamic] legal theory departs from the point where theology leaves off, assuming the truth of theology’s postulates.”² As the historical product of centuries of intense intellectual debate and revision, principally in response to a range of sociopolitical concerns and events in the first centuries of Islamic history, it was only with great time and effort that these postulates, which seldom achieved exclusive and unchallenged hegemony (but rather

periods of ascendancy and decline), came to assume axiomatic forms. The virtual demise of *kalam* thus meant the demise of the rational discourse that produced them, leaving the postulates of the historical theological enterprise to remain *as is*, unengaged and “unthought.”

Theology, in proper usage, is the systematic, rational, defensible articulation of one’s beliefs about God, revelation, the cosmos, and humanity’s relationship to the Divine. Therefore, in order to distinguish between theology in the technical sense, and its popular counterpart denoting simple religious convictions, many scholars have used terms such as “scholastic,” “dialectic,” or “systematic” theology (among others). In this book, when I use the term theology I am referring to *kalam* (or ‘*ilm al-kalam*) or theology proper. Thus, when I describe the demise of theology in Sunni Islam I am referring to theology in the technical sense and not to the disappearance of particular axiomatic religious creeds, known in the singular form as ‘*aqidah*’ (“creed”). Nor am I referring to Islamic philosophy, a separate discipline known as *falsafah*, which takes reason and the intellectual legacy of the Greeks as a starting point rather than revelation (e.g., the Qur’an) making it a target of intellectual attacks from the theologians.

Among the leading factors behind the demise of *kalam* was an anti-theological school of thought that staunchly opposed the classical theological enterprise as it responded to a range of sociopolitical concerns and conflicts, principally from the seventh to tenth centuries (CE). This is the historical tradition that stressed strict adherence to the literal outward (*zahir*) meanings of the sacred texts, known as the *Athariyya* creedal school. For the Atharis, human reason can neither be trusted nor relied upon in matters of religion, thus making theology a sinful and dangerous exercise in human arrogance. Following the demise of *kalam*, this distinctly anti-theological strain of Islamic thought, which once struggled with the intellectual argumentation of the classical Sunni theologians, flourished and contributed in important ways to the reformulation of Islamic political theory in the twentieth century, now known as “Islamism.” This new Islamic polity borrowed heavily from modern European political ideologies and centered on the so-called Islamic state. The term “Islamism” itself, however, remains a contested one and has been

employed in a variety of ways, some more problematic than others. Nikkie Keddie, for example, has described Islamism broadly as a modern movement “to increase Islam’s role in society and politics, usually with the goal of an Islamic state.”³ In this book, I propose a new definition of Islamism, articulated in chapter four, as the marriage of Athari imposed creedalism and the modern nation-state. The emergence of Islamism, under this perspective, presents a number of fascinating problems and questions for scholars that I seek to answer here.

Islamism begins historically with the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt. Founded by Hasan al-Banna (d. 1949) in 1928, the Muslim Brotherhood is widely regarded as the “grandfather” of all Islamist movements and therefore serves as the focus of this book. In 1973, the Muslim Brotherhood selected ‘Umar al-Tilmisani (d. 1986), an early follower of al-Banna, as their new leader (i.e., the Supreme Guide). Al-Tilmisani’s tenure, lasting some thirteen years, has received little attention from scholars. This is rather striking given the enormous significance of this period in the history of modern Egypt, Islamism, and contemporary Islamic thought. After all, it is during these turbulent years, which included the assassination of Anwar Sadat in 1981, that the division between radical (i.e., advocates of uncompromising and revolutionary tactics) and moderate Islamists becomes most pronounced, with ‘Umar al-Tilmisani leading the most notable moderate faction, having rejected revolutionary tactics and the use of violence to achieve political ends in his homeland. More importantly, however, careful examination of the political engagement of moderate Islamists, like al-Tilmisani and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, amidst a climate of pervasive Athari creedalism reveals alluring evidence of a distinctly theological disposition, motivated chiefly by pragmatic sociopolitical concerns, much in the same way classical Sunni theology took shape so many centuries before. However, the turmoil and bloodshed that the Muslim world endured during those early centuries, out of which the dominant schools of Sunni theology (e.g., Ash‘arism and Maturidism) eventually emerged with important resolutions, is now being forced to play out once again, with the most dangerous elements emanating from those factions opposed to theology as a satanic force and a deserving prisoner of the unthinkable.

Contemporary Muslim reformists in favor of theological renewal, such as Egypt's Muhammad Sa'id al-'Ashmawi, have offered little assistance in these matters. Rather, it appears that along with the decline of *kalam* came considerable ignorance of its principles and doctrines, even among Muslim intellectuals who pride themselves on their knowledge of Islam's rich history of scholarship. As such, the most dominant school of Sunni theology, commonly known as Ash'arism (named for the theologian Abu'l-Hasan al-Ash'ari, d. 935 CE), has long been characterized as a source of antirational scripturalism and erroneously blamed for the onset of an intellectual stagnation, as well as for the further expansion and fortification of the unthinkable in Islamic thought. However, careful examination of the rich doctrines and fascinating history of the Ash'arites reveals quite a different story and strongly refutes such arguments. Indeed, in Ash'arism, Sunni Islam may have its greatest reservoir for reform and renewal.

The Theoretical Perspective of the Book

Bruce Lincoln, a leading historian of religion at the University of Chicago, has proposed a polythetic definition of religion that identifies four essential domains. He describes the first of these as: "A discourse whose concerns transcend the human, temporal, and contingent, and that claims for itself a similarly transcendent status."⁴ Theology, the core interest of this project, is a subcategory of discourse. The second domain is practice, described as: "A set of practices whose goal is to produce a proper world and/or proper human subjects, as defined by a religious discourse to which these practices are connected."⁵ The third is community, described as: "A community whose members construct their identity with reference to a religious discourse and its attendant practices."⁶ Last, the fourth domain is institution, described by Lincoln as: "An institution that regulates religious discourse, practices, and community, reproducing them over time and modifying them as necessary while asserting their eternal validity and transcendent value."⁷ Lincoln's definition is particularly useful for the interests of this project because it highlights very clearly the degree to which alterations in religious discourse can impact (like a ripple effect) religious

practice, community, and institutions. Indeed, this holds true even for religious traditions, like Islam, that have traditionally placed greater emphasis on orthopraxy than on orthodoxy (i.e., proper practice over proper belief). Lincoln's theory is a response (in part) to the work of Talal Asad, whose critique of previously hegemonic definitions of religion (e.g., Geertz's "cultural system") exposed the way interiority (i.e., belief) was privileged to the detriment of practice, community, and institution, by scholars, and thus marginalized Islam, among other religions. However, the opposite end of the spectrum (i.e., privileging practice to the detriment of discourse) also persists in the field of Islamic studies, perhaps informed by the state of contemporary Islam. Lincoln's theory resolves both issues through its flexibility and polythetic structure and thus provides an essential framework for this analysis.

The primary theoretical significance of this book lies in its critique of the existing categories of analysis in Islamic studies that favor legal and scriptural-hermeneutic studies to the virtual exclusion of theology. As such, existing scholarship only reinforces the vision of Islam dictated by the Atharis, thereby ignoring the vital historical and intellectual enterprise that produced the foundational postulates under which all of Islamic thought, including legal theory, operates. This analysis proposes a renewed investigation into the vital role that theology (*kalam*) has played, however implicit, in modern Islamic thought, and political thought in particular. This model may also be useful in comparative studies, particularly of Christian fundamentalism. For instance, can liberalizing Catholic or Lutheran reforms be attributed to a vibrant theological enterprise, as opposed to the staunch textual conservatism of theologically devoid evangelical fundamentalists?

In recent years, Islamists have played an increasingly active role in the politics of Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, Sudan, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Nigeria, and numerous other countries. Critics and reformists have rightly perceived the potential dangers of such trends, largely in relation to the rights of women and religious minorities or secular-humanists. However, what is overlooked is the potential for the further expansion of the unthinkable and the systematic elimination of new and innovative trends in Islamic thought, the very source of reform and change. In recent decades,

several important Islamic thinkers, such as ‘Abdol-Karim Soroush of Iran and Nasr Abu Zaid of Egypt, have sought refuge in foreign countries to continue their scholarship on these issues. Only a rare few, such as the aforementioned Muhammad Sa‘id al-‘Ashmawi, have remained in the troubled waters of their homelands, albeit under armed guard. Admittedly, the ideas of these thinkers have remained behind with their devoted students and other audiences, but the most critical aspects of contemporary Islamic thought, dealing with issues of modernity, human rights, and freedom of speech (among others), are too often being forced to take place outside of the traditional Muslim world rather than within it. This study explores the potential of theology (as a rational discourse on religion) to shift or reverse such trends and open new intellectual channels in the Muslim world.

Methodology

The idea for this book originated in Cairo, Egypt, where I arrived on October 6, 2000 (“Armed Forces Day”), on a Fulbright research fellowship. My plan was to investigate how efforts at modernization in the twentieth century had effected Sunni Muslim conceptions of *tawhid* (Islamic monotheism) and whether Egyptian Sunni Muslims had theologically reconciled or justified the secular (or partially secular) political system they lived under. One day, I found myself trying to explain my research to some of my curious Egyptian Muslim friends and acquaintances at a local internet cafe. “*Kalam*,” I told them. But much to my surprise (and confusion) not one of them knew what I was talking about. After an awkward attempt at clarifying what I had meant, I settled on the word *tawhid*, a term that they all, thankfully, understood and were eager to discuss with me further. In fact, it became very clear to me over the course of my time in Egypt that no one seemed to know the meaning of the term *kalam* at all, aside from the everyday sense of the word (meaning “speech”). It was as if the word, as I knew it, and the rich Islamic science that I associated with it, was an old relic from the past that had long since been forgotten.

The mosque nearest to my flat in Zamalek, an upscale district along the Nile in the center of Cairo, was called Masjid ar-Rahman

and was led by a charismatic blind Azhar shaykh (“Shaykh Regab”) known for his passionate sermons and criticism of the Egyptian government. A number of young, well-off, English-speaking Egyptians frequented the mosque and lived in the surrounding neighborhoods. The streets in the area were full of upscale cafes, restaurants, and shops, including American cultural icons such as Pizza Hut and McDonalds (*halal* versions, of course). So it was a real surprise for me to learn that several of these young, English-speaking Egyptian men were also members of the tolerated yet outlawed Muslim Brotherhood. I was not in the habit of asking people whether they were members, but one of my acquaintances, who had complained to me that he was being pressured to join the famous Islamist group, discreetly revealed just how influential the Muslim Brotherhood was in this educated, upper-class district of Cairo. Further conversations, in Masjid ar-Rahman and elsewhere (including my flat), only bolstered his claims. Even the disciples of the popular lay preacher and Muslim “televangelist” Amr Khaled, who I had also seen at Masjid ar-Rahman and previously met at a mosque in a Cairo suburb, were identified for me as alleged members of the Muslim Brotherhood. Islamism, I quickly found, was indeed a powerful and pervasive presence in Egypt, extending from the posh shops of Zamalek to the slums and tourist traps of Giza, perhaps rivaled only by the persistent popular devotions and traditions of customary Egyptian Sunnism. As I sat down to write this book many years later, I reflected back on these events and realized how much my experiences in Egypt that year had revealed about the state of contemporary Islamic thought both in Egypt and in the broader Muslim world.

Several years ago, at the onset of the current project, I submerged myself in the writings of the major classical Sunni theologians and heresiographers, such as al-Juwayni and al-Shahrastani. Careful consideration was given to the writings of modern academic scholars on the subject, particularly those addressing it from a historical developmental perspective. During this process, I found that many of the characterizations and categories of analysis presented in these studies did not adequately reflect the material contained in the primary sources. The result was a far reaching revision of the dominant historical narrative of Islamic theology,

which I have presented here. This revisionist history of Islamic theology argues (among other things) that Sunni theology (*kalam*) effectively came to an end as an active religious science by the fifteenth century CE due to a particular confluence of factors, most notably the persistent anti-theological hostility of Athari thought. As such, I emphasize the theological rationalism of Ash‘arism and clearly differentiate it from the Atharis, thereby exonerating Ash‘arism of any blame for theology’s demise that other scholars have erroneously assigned to it.

In stark contrast to the “Golden Age” of classical Islamic civilization, modern Islamic history is generally characterized as a period of degeneration, decline, and defeat at the hands of the ascendant European colonial powers. Out of the numerous revival movements that emerged amidst the independence movements of the twentieth century, renewed Islamic political engagement and ideologies were a dominant feature. The history of Islamic theology reveals that many of the key developments and resolutions in the classical period of Islamic history were in response to dilemmas posed by the political arena. For example, the perceived impiety and tyranny of the Umayyad Caliphs (661–750 CE) was one of the primary catalysts for theological debates over predestination and freewill among Muslim scholars.⁸ An obvious question then is what the impact of this absence of theology has been on these modern political developments in the Muslim world? In pursuit of this answer I focused on the oldest and most influential Islamist group, the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt, which emerged out of the anticolonial fervor of the early twentieth century. After studying the writings of the third Supreme Guide, ‘Umar al-Tilmisani, and other materials related to him and his leading advisors and supporters, his views were examined in light of the data obtained from my study of the classical Sunni theologians and the Atharis, and then situated within my revisionist historical narrative. The writings of radical violent Islamists, such as the Egyptian Ayman al-Zawahiri, were also approached in this manner. Comparative analysis then revealed a correlation between the theological orientation of al-Tilmisani and political moderation, in contrast to the Athari positions of al-Zawahiri and Islamist radicalism.

Building on the theoretical foundations put forth by Leonard Binder and Jose Casanova, I sought to discover whether the dominant school of Sunni theology, Ash'arism, which has wrongly been blamed for theology's demise, possessed the necessary mechanisms to produce a credible basis for Islamic liberalism and therefore a sustainable political liberalism in the Muslim world. This component was a theoretical exercise and not a work of theology properly speaking. Ultimately, the exercise affirmed my suspicions; however the prospects of such developments remain unlikely at the present time due to prevailing conditions.

The Structure of the Book

The first chapter of the book, "The Doctrines of Sunni Theology," introduces the reader to the principal doctrines of Sunni theology within the Ash'arite and Maturidite schools. The differences and similarities between the two "orthodox" Sunni schools are detailed with extensive references to the treatises of leading classical theologians, such as al-Ash'ari, al-Maturidi, al-Juwayni, and al-Ghazali, among others. Particular attention is given to the role of human reason in Islamic theological discourse. This will also allow the reader to distinguish between the two orthodox Sunni schools of theology and the Athari school, as well as understand the "creedal collapse" described in chapter two. Having laid the foundation for chapter two, "The Demise of 'Ilm al-Kalam," it examines the history of Athari thought in Sunni Islam and the gradual demise of theology as an active discipline by the fifteenth century (CE). It also examines four principal causes for theology's decline with some surprising conclusions and serious implications for modern Islamic thought. It then concludes with a brief summation of the sparse and largely insignificant attempts at theological discourse that took place between the fifteenth and twentieth century and sets the stage for the emergence of the Muslim Brotherhood, the first Islamist movement, in 1920s colonial Egypt.

Chapter three, "Between Theology and Creed," provides an in-depth analysis of the ideas and political views of the third Supreme Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood, 'Umar al-Tilmisani,

with special attention given to both the theological and Athari aspects of his sociopolitical positions, and situates them within the history of Islamic theology. Al-Tilmisani himself was the author of some fourteen works in Arabic, which have yet to be translated into English. Three of these Arabic works are used in this study, namely *Dhikriyyat La Mudhakkirat* ("Memories Not Memoirs," 1985), *al-Hukumah al-Diniyyah* ("Religious Government," 1985), and *Fi Riyad al-Tawhid* ("In the Garden of Monotheism," 1987), with passages translated into English for perhaps the first time. The chapter then concludes by asserting a tantalizing correlation between theological discourse and political moderation. Chapter four, "The Guide through the Storm," introduces the reader to the principal events of al-Tilmisani's life in Egypt and presents a portrait of an Islamist leader who rejected the path of extremism and violence in favor of moderation and compromise at a time of great political turmoil. The reader will also find a detailed account of the core events in the history of the Muslim Brotherhood during that time and the emergence of more radical Islamists on the periphery.

Chapter five, "The Taliban and the Maturidite School," examines the emergence of the Taliban movement in Afghanistan in the late 1990s following the devastating political conflicts and wars in South Asia. The dominant narrative of the origins of the Taliban situates them within the Deobandi tradition of the Indian subcontinent. Given that the Deobandi movement was originally Hanafi, a commonly made assumption is that the Taliban must have adhered to the Maturidite school of theology. This chapter explores the connection (or lack thereof) between the Taliban and the Maturidites. It concludes that the schools (*madrāsas*) from which the Taliban emerged were co-opted by Athari-Wahhabites and must be situated within that "genealogy."

Chapter six, "The Promise of Ash'arite Semiotics," is a potentially controversial theoretical exercise exploring the potential of renewed Ash'arite theological discourse as a basis for political liberalism in modern Muslim nation-states. Drawing from the works of such scholars as Jose Casanova, Leonard Binder, Ferdinand De Saussure (d. 1913), and leading classical Ash'arite theologians, a renewed theological approach to the Qur'an and its sociopolitical implications are

presented. The final chapter, “The Revival of Kalam?,” concludes the book by presenting an analysis of the prospects for a revival of theology in contemporary Sunni Islam and offers a critical review of several leading contemporary reformists engaged in some level of theological discourse.

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CHAPTER 1

The Doctrines of Sunni Theology

Sunni theology has been intertwined with politics since the very beginning. After the Prophet Muhammad's death in 632 CE, the disputes and debates over the qualifications, responsibilities, and personal conduct of his successors, the caliphs, produced perhaps the earliest theological formulations in Islamic thought outside of the Qur'an itself. Questions regarding the qualifications and status of the *imam* or caliph (*khalifah*), including his piety (or lack thereof), the qualifications of a believer (*mu'min*), membership in the Muslim community, and the status of Islamic law (*shari'ah*), all retained a central place in subsequent theological discourse for centuries to come. The theological postulates and systems of thought that these early debates initiated then led to the formation of comprehensive schools of theology (*kalam*), which in turn formulated the foundational postulates under which all of Sunni thought, including legal theory, operates.

By the reign of the Mamluk Empire in Cairo, Egypt, in the fourteenth century (CE), Sunnism's emergence as Islam's "orthodoxy," consisting of four coexisting and equally valid *madhahib* (schools of law) and two ostensibly compatible theological schools, took definitive shape. The notion of the equality and full orthodoxy of the four Sunni *madhahib*, initiated by their predecessors, the Ayyubids (and perhaps the Zangids), was officially sanctioned under Mamluk rule, with conformist Sunni solidarity against nonbelievers (e.g., Crusaders), Shi'ism, Mu'tazilism, and the philosophers (*falasifah*),

dominating intellectual life.¹ It was in this atmosphere that the Ash‘arite scholar Taj al-Din al-Subki (d. 1370 CE) wrote his famous poem *al-Nuniyyah*, investigating the points of difference between the two major Sunni schools of *kalam*, the Ash‘arites and the Maturidites, in which he concluded that their differences were only minor and, in some instances, merely semantic in nature.² Al-Subki’s contention was then adopted by the Sunni community, overlooking centuries of bitter antagonism between Ash‘arite Shafi‘ites and Malikites with Maturidite Hanafites.³

Al-Subki’s conclusion deliberately overlooked much of what separated the two leading Sunni theological schools, as well their history of mutual antagonism, in the name of Sunni solidarity. Other works of the time (as well as subsequent works), such as the popular commentary on the Maturidite creed of Abu Hafs al-Nasafi (d. 1142 CE) by the Ash‘arite theologian Mas‘ud ibn ‘Umar al-Taftazani (d. 1370 CE), further blurred the distinction and contributed to the decline of theology (see chapter two).⁴ Modern scholars too have typically continued this trend (although with different intentions), generally giving little or no attention to the Maturidites, insinuating or assuming little difference between it and Ash‘arism. The late Ignaz Goldziher, for instance, made the influential claim that “there are no essential differences between the two schools.”⁵ The two do indeed share a great deal in common, with both advocating a middle position (to different degrees) between the Mu‘tazilites and the Atharis, but important differences do remain. In this chapter we will pursue some of those differences in order to map the doctrines of Sunni theology and thereafter distinguish them from the anti-theological doctrines of the Atharis over the course of this analysis. In so doing, I have deliberately emphasized certain doctrines of the Ash‘arites and Maturidites that are especially pertinent to the project while excluding others, such as the contingency of the world, that have little relevance to the task ahead.

The Ash‘arites

The dominant historical narrative of Islamic theology has it that the Ash‘arites aligned themselves with Athari doctrines, despite

the Atharis' adamant rejection and rebuke of theological views and methods, including those of the Ash'arites. However, this narrative overlooks the work of the great George Makdisi, who explained the concept of al-Ash'ari's "two roads." Makdisi argued that al-Ash'ari accepted two paths to salvation. The traditionalist Athari path for the common, uneducated people was acceptable, but the superior "path of wisdom" was that of the theologians.⁶ As such, some of al-Ash'ari's writings and praise of traditionalist or Athari views (one of the two roads) are the root cause of the erroneous impression contained in the dominant narrative. The Ash'arite school, which departs from its historical eponym on many points, did nominally adhere to a number of Athari doctrines as well, albeit through rational theological methods. But closer inspection reveals that this is accurate only on the most superficial level. Basic creedal parallels between the Ash'arites and Atharis, such as the belief that the Qur'an is the uncreated (*ghayr makhlūq*) Speech of God or the reality of the beatific vision (*ru'ya*), are misleading and they have skewed impressions of Ash'arism in Western scholarship, along with the assumption that the eponym's views definitively represent those of his school. For example, on the question of faith (*iman*), W. Montgomery Watt stated that "for al-Ash'ari and *his followers*, as for *the Hanbalites*, faith (*iman*) consists of word and act, that is, profession of belief and fulfillment of the prescribed duties" (emphasis mine).⁷ Watt's view, which is shared by many, is largely incorrect. In another similar instance, Fazlur Rahman, who was greatly influenced by Western scholars, heaped great scorn against the Ash'arites, apparently unaware of any difference between them and the Atharis.⁸ We will dispense with this trend here, as Makdisi and a selection of other scholars have already done. Oliver Leaman, in his insightful study *An Introduction to Classical Islamic Philosophy*, emphasized the rationalism of Ash'arism and its shared ground, not with the Atharis, but with the Mu'tazilites, contending:

It is worth pointing out that there is no justification for thinking that the [Mu'tazilites] hold reason in greater respect than the [Ash'arites]. Indeed . . . it might be claimed that precisely the reverse is the case, in that the Ash'arites, as opposed to the Mu'tazilites, more readily admit reason's relevance to the very basis of faith.⁹

With this important observation in mind, we will examine the considerable impact that the Ash'arite emphasis on reason (as a *theological* school) had on their doctrines, and in the process observe their departure from the Atharis with whom they are so often confused. The Ash'arites, like virtually all theological schools, were not all of one single view, and there are some disparities between Ash'arite scholars over certain doctrines and details, for instance, between al-Qushayri and al-Juwayni, or between al-Baqillani and al-Ghazali, among others. Yet, it is still possible for us to briefly explore the Ash'arite school in general terms, and we will attempt to do so here.

Like the Atharis, the Ash'arites affirmed that the Qur'an is the uncreated Speech of God. However, beyond this deceptively straightforward affirmation lies a great deal of theological complexity that places the Ash'arite doctrine at odds with that of the Atharis. The Ash'arites advocated an important distinction between God's eternal Speech (*kalam nafi*), which subsists in His Essence, and that which exists in the form of contingent human language (e.g., Arabic), whether written or spoken (*kalam al-hissi*). As Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406 CE) relates, "among the Arabs, speech has another meaning, different from letter and voice, namely 'that which goes around the soul (*khalad*).'"¹⁰ God's Speech, which is one of His Attributes, is eternal and uncreated, but the written and spoken Qur'an is created and consists only of symbols and temporal but inimitable (indeed, miraculous) representations of that eternal and uncreated Speech that does not cease. In his *Kitab al-Irshad*, al-Juwayni emphasized that God's Speech is eternal and without commencement. That which consists of letters and sounds, written on pages of paper with lines of ink that consist of letters and sentences preceding one after another, beginning and ending, are therefore necessarily contingent and created. "We know by necessity that the existence of that for which there is a commencement is itself temporally contingent," he writes, "those who believe in the eternity of the Speech of the Exalted God and its subsistence in the essence of the Creator . . . and the impossibility of its separating from that to which it is attributed, will have no doubt at all about the impossibility of its being transposed."¹¹ Shahrastani in his celebrated heresiography *Kitab al-Milal wa'l-Nihal* relates al-Ash'ari's

view that: "The sentences and words which are revealed through the tongues of angels to the prophets are signs of the eternal word: the sign itself is created and originated, but what is signified is eternal."¹² The Qur'an itself states that God's Speech was revealed to humanity many times before Muhammad throughout history and to other prophets, such as Moses and Jesus (see, e.g., 3:3, 5:46–48). Thus, the Arabic Qur'an (12:2) revealed to Muhammad, which addresses the Arabs and his own personal and historical circumstances, could not be in the complete sense God's uncreated Speech existing before time on the Preserved Tablet (85:21–22). Rather, the unceasing Speech of God "is not a sound," and "is neither Arabic, nor Syriac, nor Hebrew," as al-Qushayri (d. 1072 CE) once wrote:

God's Speech [when manifested] in Arabic is called "a *qur'an*," in Syriac "an *injeel*," and in Hebrew "a *taurat*"; but the Qur'an is also, in the strict sense, God's Speech and so too the *Taurat* [Torah] and the *Injeel* [Gospel] . . . That the Creator's Speech be called Qur'an, *Taurat*, and *Injeel* does not imply multiplicity of His Speech, just as He is called "*Allah*" in Arabic, "*Izid*" in Persian, and "*Tanri*" in Turkish, but is One.¹³

Hence, while the Essence of the Book (*Umm al-Kitab*; see 13:39) is one and uncreated, the different linguistic manifestations of His Speech at particular moments in history are necessarily contingent and created, even if, in the exclusive case of the Qur'an, the text is both miraculous and protected from human or demonic corruption.

The Ash'arites affirmed that God is indeed All-Knowing and All-Powerful, and that all things are created by Him, whether good or evil. God is capable of imposing either good or evil on anyone He chooses, since no limits or restrictions apply to Him as the author and creator of all things (6:103, 13:16). But the Ash'arites are not, as it is sometimes thought, proponents of predestination (*jabr*). As al-Qushayri states: "The true doctrine is neither one of total autonomy (*qadar*) or of compulsion (*jabr*)."¹⁴ The Ash'arites advocated the middle doctrine of *kasb* ("acquisition"), which contends that all actions, whether good or evil, are created by God (37:96) and that acts are only *acquired* by

human beings through selection or choice (*ikhtiyyar*). In this scheme, every human being is presented with a finite set of potential actions at every instant in time, as one might imagine forty or seventy or a hundred doors presenting themselves at every step along a long path. Human beings, as God's vicegerent on earth, are endowed with the capacity or power (*qudra*) to choose and perform a course of action, being responsible for those choices (good deeds or sins) on the Day of Judgment, but the creation (*khalq*) of the acts rests with God alone. As Shahrastani states: "A man's act must be ascribed in a true sense to his own power, though not in the sense of bringing it into being and creating it."¹⁵ Based on human choices, new sets of potential actions will constantly (at every instant) present themselves again and again throughout a person's life (although the number of options will inevitably fluctuate dramatically), and depending on that person's choices, he or she will either go astray (to sin) or adhere to the straight path to righteousness. Hypothetically, if there were seventy-two courses of action, seventy-one could lead to sin and only one to the grace of God, or vice versa (see 14:4, 16:93). But there is no course of action except what God has willed into creation, and His parameters and limits can never be transgressed, save by His leave (such is the case with miracles). Human beings furthermore do not acquire the power to commit a particular act until the moment of its execution, and not before or after (and only by God's Will). The Ash'arite scheme thus preserves monotheism (*tawhid*), God's power and decree (*qadar*), and human responsibility along with the need for the Law and Day of Judgment. For many Ash'arite scholars, proof of a human being's ability to choose his or her actions from divinely created acts (and limits) can be observed in the voluntary and involuntary actions of the human body. As al-Baqillani states:

Man recognizes the difference between whether he is standing, sitting, or talking—movements that occur according to his volition and intention—or between acts to which he is forced, but which he cannot commit because he lacks the strength on account of an illness, as someone who is paralyzed cannot move.¹⁶

Regarding the seemingly anthropomorphic verses in the Qur'an (e.g., 55:27, 48:10, 7:54), it is said that al-Ash'ari himself preferred the

view of the famous Athari traditionalist, Ahmed ibn Hanbal (d. 855 CE), and chose to accept them *bila kayf* (“without asking how”) without attempting to understand them beyond their description in the Qur’an and traditions. Al-Qushayri, a student of Ibn Furak (d. 1015 CE), shared this view, stating: “The Eternal is described as having two hands (38:75) which are attributes whose reality we assert on the basis of revealed report.”¹⁷ However, many other Ash‘arite scholars, such as al-Baqillani, al-Juwayni, and al-Ghazali, argued that these verses must be understood metaphorically. As al-Juwayni states: “What is correct, in our view, is that the hands [of God] should be construed as power, the eyes as vision, and the face as existence.”¹⁸ In general, the Ash‘arites took great pains to avoid anything that might be construed as anthropomorphism (*tashbih*), and this attitude carried over to the Ash‘arite conception of the beatific vision (*ru’ya*) as well (see 75:23). The Ash‘arites affirmed the reality of the beatific vision, but, unlike the Atharis, they argued that it did not entail direction, spatiality, or any face to face encounter with God. For the Ash‘arites, reason dictates that everything that exists can ultimately be seen, and if God exists, then He can be seen, although the experience of it may be beyond our present abilities. As al-Ghazali asserts: “Although [God is] far removed from form and quantity and unlimited by directions and location, [He] is nevertheless seen by the eyes in the hereafter, the everlasting abode.”¹⁹

Regarding the status of the believer, the Ash‘arites maintained that *iman* resides in the heart alone, and that words and actions are only “branches of belief,” making faith in the heart ultimately the sole requisite for salvation and membership in the community, even if failure to obey God’s commands remains punishable. In the passage quoted earlier, Watt stated that the Ash‘arites and Atharis shared the same understanding of *iman*. Yet, al-Juwayni states quite clearly that: “The Partisans of Hadith [i.e., Atharis] hold that faith is cognizance in the heart, confession by the tongue, and acts performed by the limbs and members, [but] the doctrines we [i.e., the Ash‘arites] approve is that the real nature of faith is true belief in God, the Exalted.”²⁰ Shahrastani furthermore states that:

Al-Ash‘ari holds that *iman* is inner belief; as for its verbal expression and external practice, these are “branches” of belief. Whoever,

therefore, believes in his heart, such a one's *iman* is valid if immediately afterwards he dies with this *iman* he will be regarded as a believer and be saved. Nothing will make him cease to be a believer except the denial of one of these truths. Whoever commits a grave sin, and dies without repentance, his judgment will rest with God.²¹

Admittedly, al-Qushayri's view differs again, relating that "*iman* is the doing what God has commanded as obligatory," and through *iman* and knowledge (*ma'arifah*) "one achieves the everlasting reward and salvation from the painful punishment."²² But al-Ghazali, like al-Juwayni and Shahrastani, affirmed that *iman* means *tasdiq* ("assent"), which lies in the heart and represents the noblest part of Islam.²³ In this, the Ash'arites drew support from the Qur'an (see, e.g., 16:106), which makes the distinction between those who outwardly profess and practice Islam and those who *believe* (see, e.g., 49:14). The *iman* of the believer can also increase and decrease throughout his or her life, as degrees of doubt and certainty are key elements of Ash'arite doctrine (see discussion of *taqlid* later). The Atharis, in contrast, held that *iman* increases and decreases in correlation with the performance of prescribed rituals and duties, such as the five daily prayers.

Like all Sunni Muslims, the Ash'arites affirmed God's Attributes (*sifat*), but emphasized seven essential ones (*sifat dhatiyya*), namely Power, Knowledge, Life, Will, Speech, Hearing, and Sight, which eternally subsist in God's Essence. In contrast to the Mu'tazilites (who are not Sunni), al-Ash'ari held that the Attributes are not simply words (*lafz*) or modes (*ahwal*), but real things (*ashya'*) subsisting in God from eternity.²⁴ All parties agreed that God was, for instance, knowing and powerful, but al-Ash'ari held that the reality of the Attributes meant, for example, that God's Knowledge was distinct and discernable from His Power, and that the Attributes were not simply the semantic products of human perception reflecting on God's Essence. For if that were the case, God would be knowing by His Power and powerful by His Knowledge, and one could hypothetically know that God is knowing and powerful by His Essence and His Essence by His Knowledge and His Power and so forth. As Shahrastani states: "Reason demands that there

must be two different concepts corresponding to two different words... [thus] it is clear that the difference between two aspects is due to an attribute which subsists in the essence.”²⁵ Thus, despite their distinctiveness, the Attributes are neither identical nor other than God, but rather inhere in Him (maintaining God’s unity).²⁶ “It cannot be said that [the Attributes] are He or other than He,” writes Shahrastani, “nor can it be said that they are not He, nor that they are not other than He.”²⁷ The ambiguity in al-Ash‘ari’s position led to differing opinions among the Ash‘arites (once again) over the nature of the Attributes. For example, al-Baqillani is said to have accepted the theory of modes (*al-ahwal*), as did al-Juwayni (with some complex variation), among others.²⁸ The theory of modes is generally associated with the son of al-Ash‘ari’s master al-Jubba‘i, Abu Hashim (d. 933 CE), who held that the Attributes were not things as such, but modes of God’s Being that are neither existent nor nonexistent and that cannot be known apart from God’s Essence. As Shahrastani states: “The ‘knowing’ of the Knowing One is a mode of the Essence which is an Attribute over and above His being an essence; that is, what is meant by knowing is other than what is meant by the essence.”²⁹ Abu Hashim held that there were four, not seven, eternal modes of the Essence furnished by an underlying fifth causative mode, that of Godhood (*al-ilahiyyah*).³⁰ Those Ash‘arites that accepted “modes” harmonized them with the Ash‘arite conception of Attributes with a great deal of semantic creativity, and defended the inclusion of Speech, Hearing, and Seeing, thus preserving the traditional number at seven. Beyond the seven essential Attributes, the Ash‘arites also affirmed the Attributes of act (*sifat al-fi‘liyya*), such as Mercy, Love, Wrath, and so forth, which exist only when God acts in relation to His Creation. These Attributes are therefore not eternal and do not subsist in His Essence, although certain semantic exercises among the Ash‘arites sometimes led to ambiguity on this subject as well.

The Ash‘arites rejected the notion of *taqlid*, or the blind imitation of pious predecessors, contending that every individual must examine and investigate religious arguments and doctrine for themselves; a notion that undoubtedly contributed to the diversity and historical development of Ash‘arite thought. Al-Ash‘ari, in fact, declared a *muqallid*, or an adherent of *taqlid*, to be an unbeliever, stating that

one of the conditions of “true faith” is that it is founded on intellectual arguments (*istidlal*).³¹ Indeed, Ibn Hazm, who was an Athari scholar of the now extinct Zahirite school of law in Spain, even reported that for al-Ash‘ari no one was a believer “unless after reaching maturity he doubts and does not believe,” thus preparing the way for intellectual arguments.³² The Mu‘tazilites too rejected *taqlid*, albeit on different grounds, as well as the Maturidites, as we will soon see. On this point all parties drew support from the Qur’an, which appears to reject the notion of *taqlid* as well (see, e.g., 43:22–24). Given this fact, the curious onset of *taqlid* throughout the Muslim world is only further evidence of the decline and later demise of theology.

Last, nearly every summation of Sunni theology includes a section on the first debate in Islam after the Prophet’s death, namely the imamate and the rightful heirs of the leadership of the Muslim community. True to their Sunni identity, the Ash‘arite position states, as al-Juwayni relates:

The imamate of Abu Bakr was established by the unanimous agreement of the Companions... the matter is uncontestable, [while] in regard to ‘Umar, ‘Uthman, and ‘Ali, may God be pleased with them, the method of confirming their imamates and proving that they each fulfilled the conditions for the imamate is like that for the imamate of Abu Bakr.³³

Shahrastani further noted that “succession to the imamate is by consensus and election, not by decree or appointment,” concluding that ‘Umar was agreed upon *after* Abu Bakr appointed him, thus salvaging the principle (although rather spuriously).³⁴

The Maturidites

Despite the common assertion that the Maturidites are one of the two “orthodox” schools of Sunni theology along with Ash‘arism, few (whether Muslim or non-Muslim) know anything of their doctrines. Indeed, even a general awareness of the school and its views beyond eastern Hanafite circles apparently failed to occur until the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries (CE). For instance, Shahrastani’s *Milal*, despite its vast collection of sects (both popular and obscure),

contains no mention of the Maturidite school or the “scholars of Samarqand” at all. Ibn Khaldun’s famous *Muqaddimah*, written in the fourteenth century, also makes no mention of the Maturidites, but readily extols the teachings of al-Ash‘ari and the Ash‘arites in his section on theology. Elsewhere in the *Muqaddimah*, Ibn Khaldun does make a few brief and obscure references to “Hanafite theologians,” but never mentions either al-Maturidi or Samarqand as such, and he never demonstrates any comprehensive knowledge of their doctrines. Indeed, as one of the few modern scholars of Maturidite theology Wilfred Madelung has written, “Maturidism, in contrast to Ash‘arism, did not arouse any attention among other theological circles for over a century after the death of its founder [in the tenth century].”³⁵ The earliest known reference to what we now know as the Maturidite school apparently comes to us in a treatise by an Ash‘arite theologian, Abu Bakr Ahmad ibn Muhammad al-Furaki (d. 1086 CE), from the year 1072 CE when he was a professor at the *madrassa Nizamiyyah* in Baghdad.³⁶ But subsequent references to the Maturidites (or the “scholars of Samarqand”) remained few and far between (e.g., al-Taftazani), as suggested by Ibn Khaldun’s continued silence centuries later. Even in our own time, few studies of Islamic theology have given any attention to al-Maturidi or his school, almost none systematically, and not for any lack of importance. Harry A. Wolfson’s massive study *The Philosophy of Kalam*, for instance, devotes only three pages out of approximately eight hundred to al-Maturidi, relying on only three small passages taken from other studies (two of which are in German).³⁷ Binyamin Abrahamov’s more recent study, *Islamic Theology: Traditionalism and Rationalism*, makes no mention of al-Maturidi or his school at all, except for two brief endnotes.³⁸ Rather, until the edited edition of al-Maturidi’s *Kitab al-Tawhid* was published in 1970 (in Arabic), few scholars had ever laid their hands on a work by the famous eponym. And though accessible now, his *Kitab al-Tawhid* remains a notoriously difficult text, making the impact of its publication far less significant than one might guess. The reality is that a detailed account of the fundamental doctrines of Maturidite theology remains a surprisingly challenging task, especially when we consider the pervasive (and problematic) tendency among scholars to resort to Ash‘arite works in order to explain Maturidite doctrines.

Nevertheless, we will attempt to examine Maturidite doctrines here and earnestly try to allow the Maturidites to speak for themselves free from the views or intrusions of their fellow orthodox brethren.

It is generally understood that the Maturidite school systematically developed existing Hanafite doctrines, in part, to refute the positions of the Mu'tazilites, the Karramites, Atharis, and Shi'ites (both Imami and Isma'ili), as well as Christians, Zoroastrians, Jews, and others, who had a presence in Transoxiana during the tenth and eleventh centuries (CE).³⁹ As such, unlike Mu'tazilism and Ash'arism, Maturidite theology has always remained associated exclusively with only one Sunni *madhhab*, the Hanafites.⁴⁰ From the very beginning, al-Maturidi's teachings were representative of eastern Hanafism, sparing him the hostile opposition faced by al-Ash'ari, save for those Hanafites who adhered to Mu'tazilism (especially to the West).⁴¹ The school we now recognize as the Maturidites was thus, for centuries, simply understood as systematic Hanafite theology, generally adhering to the doctrines allegedly held by Abu Hanifah (d. 767 CE). Abu Hanifah was, despite being the eponym of the most widespread Sunni school of law, as much a theologian as he was a jurist. In fact, Madelung has theorized that Abu Hanifah's distinct theological doctrines even played a major role in the later conversion of Turkic peoples to Islam—a major turning point in Islamic civilization. Maturidite works appear to emphasize Abu Hanifah's view that one who affirms Islam as a whole in a land of polytheism, but does not know or affirm the Qur'an or any of the religious duties of Islam yet is still a believer (*mu'min*).⁴² "[As such] a Turkish nomad might well be willing to confess his adherence to Islam without being able or willing to learn the intricacies of its ritual and law."⁴³ Thus, the connection between Maturidite theology and Hanafism was rather organic from the start, especially among the Turkic peoples, who have long since been its greatest partisans and defenders.

Generally considered more rationalist than the Ash'arites (which does not appear to be true), the Maturidites held that human beings can attain knowledge of God, as well as their obligations to Him, through reason alone (without the aid of revelation).⁴⁴ As al-Maturidi states: "All this is among those things which can be known only by reasoning."⁴⁵ Al-Ash'ari, on the other hand, held that while knowledge

of God can be acquired through reason alone, reason does not impose any obligation nor can it declare anything good or bad (which comes only through revelation).⁴⁶ Rather, the Ash‘arites affirmed a form of ethical subjectivism, deferring instead to the decree of the Qur‘an and sunnah of the Prophet (as related in the Hadith traditions) on such matters (albeit rationally understood). As Shahrastani states, in the Ash‘arite view: “Reason may consider one thing necessary from one point of view, but from another point of view may consider its opposite necessary.”⁴⁷

Among their doctrines, the Maturidites held that God’s Speech (His Attribute) is eternal and uncreated. However, in contrast to the Atharis, the Maturidites held that God’s Speech cannot be heard, making whatever is heard or written created. As al-Maturidi states: “God made Moses hear through Moses’ tongue and through the letters He created and the sound He originated; therefore God made him hear that which was not created.”⁴⁸ By this, the Maturidites apparently shared the Ash‘arite distinction between *kalam al-nafsi* and *kalam al-hissi*, but the technical distinction was definitely foreign to al-Maturidi and likely came about under later Ash‘arite influence. In fact, it is difficult to ignore the level of ambiguity present in the Maturidite position. Al-Nasafi, for instance, states the Maturidite understanding of the Qur‘an as:

[God] speaks with a kind of Speech which is one of His Attributes, from all eternity, *not of the genus of letters and sounds*. It is an attribute incompatible with silence and defect. God Speaks with this attribute, commanding, prohibiting, and narrating. The Qur‘an, the Speech of God, is uncreated and it is written in our volumes, preserved in our hearts, recited by our tongues, heard by our ears, *yet is not a thing residing in them* [emphasis mine].⁴⁹

Al-Nasafi appears to suggest that the Arabic Qur‘an is at once created, and yet inseparable from God’s uncreated Speech, even in its various manifestations, whether written, spoken, or heard. The Ash‘arite scholar al-Taftazani, commenting on this passage, contended that the meaning of al-Nasafi’s exposition was identical to the Ash‘arite doctrine. However, al-Taftazani appears to be projecting a range of Ash‘arite ideas into the text, ideas that were

likely foreign (perhaps even unacceptable) to al-Nasafi himself. In his recent study of Maturidite theology (a rarity in itself) *Roots of Synthetic Theology in Islam*, Mustafa Ceriç curiously devoted little more than a paragraph to the topic, accompanied by only a smattering of somewhat unhelpful quotations from al-Maturidi's *Kitab al-Tawhid*.⁵⁰ Either Ceriç felt the topic is unimportant (in contrast to the importance afforded to it by the Ash'arites) or Maturidite works (of which there are few existent) contain insufficient details on the subject, hence the reliance on Ash'arite works. In fact, Goldziher (contradicting his aforementioned assertion), quoting from an unidentified source, relates the Maturidite opinion of the Ash'arite doctrine, stating: "This assertion of the Ash'arites [regarding the Qur'an] has even less validity than the opinion of the Mu'tazilah."⁵¹

Another discussion of the Maturidite doctrine of the Qur'an as "God's Speech" was penned by the renowned Ottoman scholar Kemal Pashazade (d. 1534), who was appointed Shaykh al-Islam during the reign of the Ottoman Sultan Sulayman the Magnificent (r. 1520–66). While helpful in many respects, his short treatise entitled "The Disagreements Between the Ash'aris and Maturidis" carries the same shortcomings that we have found elsewhere on the subject. In fact, its brevity and attention to Ash'arite theology is only further evidence of the demise of Sunni theology (*kalam*) by the fifteenth century (CE), as we will examine in chapter two. Kemale Pashazade does, as his title suggests, examine twelve important differences between the schools (apparently such a treatise was needed at the time), asserting that "there is no contention between the two Shaykhs [al-Ash'ari and al-Maturidi] and their followers, except in twelve issues."⁵² The second of the twelve issues listed in his treatise deals with the subject of God's Speech. It states: "Al-Maturidi said that the Speech of Allah, the Exalted, is not heard [*al-masmu*], rather what is heard is that which points to it."⁵³ From there, Kemal Pashazade recounts the views of four different Ash'arite scholars, namely al-Ash'ari, Ibn Furak, al-Baqillani, and Abu Ishaq. Apparently there are no other Maturidite scholars of consequence for Kemal Pashazade to include other than the eponym. Of course, the nature of Kemal Pashazade's treatise is comparative, but it is difficult to overlook the continued reliance on Ash'arism to explain Maturidite views. In fact, a helpful

commentary on Kemal Pashazade's treatise, cited in the footnotes of a 2009 English translation, has been provided by a contemporary Jordanian Ash'arite scholar Shaykh Sa'id Foudah (see chapter seven). He clarifies that according to al-Maturidi:

That which is heard only applies to that which connects with the sense of hearing... according to him, that which connects with it are the sounds that point to the pre-eternal Attribute [of God's Speech]... For al-Maturidi, hearing is conditioned upon the connection of the senses, and for that reason he denied that Inner Speech [*kalam nafsī*] can be heard.⁵⁴

Regarding the question of freewill and determinism, the Maturidites affirmed the doctrine of *kasb*, but with some variation that allotted human beings greater power and responsibility for their choices than that granted by the Ash'arites. The Maturidites held that there were two powers in every act, the first being the power of creation that belongs to God, and the second being the power of acquisition, which belongs to human agents who freely choose their acts. As al-Maturidi states: "Actions are God's, inasmuch as He created them as they are, and made them to be after they were not; and they belong to created beings inasmuch as they acquire and do them."⁵⁵ The recognition of this power, al-Maturidi argued, is based on a person's consciousness of his or her Self (*min nafsīhi*), or self-intuition, and not on the basis of rational proofs.⁵⁶ In the Maturidite view, human choices also precede the creation of an act on the part of God. As Madelung has concisely stated: "[For al-Maturidi] the initial choice is man's, not God's as for al-Ash'ari."⁵⁷ Yet everything nevertheless comes from God, whether good or evil. On this point, al-Maturidi stressed God's Wisdom in His created acts, even those that appear to be evil or ugly, stating:

There is no harmful action at all from which one cannot receive benefit either through the way of guidance (*dalalah*) or admonition (*maw'izah*), or that there cannot be in it the reminder of benefaction or the warning for retribution, or that it might not lead to the knowledge of He to whom the creation and the command belong, and many other things which would take us long to mention.⁵⁸

His view therefore stresses acceptance and patience through adversity, but it is undoubtedly tenuous when we consider the full range of “evil” existent in the world.

The Maturidites advocated *ta’wil*, or metaphorical interpretation, of any seemingly anthropomorphic or ambiguous verses in the Qur’an, but they also resorted to using the traditionalist formula of *bila kayf* as well.⁵⁹ Al-Maturidi himself seems to have refrained from *ta’wil*, but seldom referred to *ahadith*, placing a greater emphasis on personal reflection, which was common among Hanafites.⁶⁰ He firmly rejected any suggestion that God was a body (*jism*), maintaining that “God is far from being like anything in terms of both His Essence and Attributes” (see, e.g., 42:11), but he also refrained from interpreting the hands, eyes, or face of God, or the sitting on the Throne (see 20:5), as related in the Qur’an.⁶¹ We should note that the formula *bila kayf* (“without asking how”) does not explicitly appear in his *Kitab al-Tawhid*, but he does reject any qualification (*kayf*) of God, who is beyond human comprehension.⁶² As he states: “He has no quality which the imagination can grasp or that the intellect can comprehend, being above all this.”⁶³ Al-Nasafi’s creed, furthermore, makes no mention of the hands, eyes, or face of God, or of how the believers should understand them. The Maturidites did affirm the beatific vision in Paradise (*ru’ya*), but, like the Ash‘arites, held that it does not entail direction, and lies beyond the capacity of human eyes in this world. As al-Nasafi states: “He is seen [in the abode of the next world] not in a place nor in a direction so far as being confronted, nor by the conjunction of the rays of light, nor by a certain definite distance between the one who sees and God.”⁶⁴ On this view, al-Maturidi held that the reality of the beatific vision was based solely on scriptural authority, but later Maturidites affirmed it via the Ash‘arites’ rational proofs.⁶⁵ It is reasonable to conclude then that the Maturidites did eventually dispense with Athari (*bila kayf*) understandings of ambiguous verses in favor of *ta’wil*, although it appears al-Maturidi and others refrained from it while still emphasizing God’s transcendence, which defies description.

On the question of *iman*, the Maturidites held that belief was assent (*tasdiq*) of the heart and confession of the tongue, a stance derived from the moderate Murji’ite⁶⁶ view once held by Abu Hanifah in the eighth century (CE). Al-Maturidi argued that since

iman is a matter of the heart, and actions are a matter of the body, it does not mean that if the body fails to follow the heart then faith ceases to exist.⁶⁷ As al-Nasafi states: "Belief is assent to that which he [i.e., the Prophet] brought from God and confession of it [i.e., to the exclusion of works]."⁶⁸ This view of *iman* (which includes confession) is at odds with the Ash'arite doctrine, and al-Taftazani, despite his deep admiration for al-Nasafi, refutes the Maturidite position in his commentary.⁶⁹ However, al-Taftazani also breaks from his fellow Ash'arites when he affirms the Maturidite view that *iman* neither increases nor decreases.⁷⁰ As al-Nasafi states: "As for works, they increase in and of themselves, but belief neither increases nor decreases."⁷¹ Al-Maturidi furthermore held that *iman* is impossible in the presence of force or compulsion, and must derive from the human agent's will and power to choose (see, e.g., 18:24).⁷² He also, following again the Murji'ite view of Abu Hanifah, held that a believer does not cease to be a believer if he or she commits a grave sin and will ultimately enter paradise.⁷³ The Maturidites, like the Ash'arite and Mu'tazilite theologians, rejected the notion of *taqlid*, but on separate grounds. The Maturidite understanding of *iman*, as well as *kasb*, led to the view that if a person must freely choose to believe (under no compulsion), then a person's reasons for religious assent must also rest on his or her own efforts and knowledge, and not on the faith affirmed by someone else, no matter how pious or worthy of emulation that person may be.⁷⁴

The Maturidites, like the Ash'arites and all Sunnis, affirmed the Divine Attributes and argued that they subsist in the Divine Essence. As al-Nasafi states, echoing the Ash'arite position: "He has attributes from all eternity subsistent in His Essence; they are not He nor are they other than He."⁷⁵ However, the Maturidites added an eighth essential Attribute (*al-sifat al-dhatiyyah*), Creating (*takwin*), to the seven affirmed by the Ash'arites, which was a point of some friction between the two schools. The Maturidite view was based on the argument that the thing created is initiated by the origination of the connection, and not on there being a necessary connection between Creating and what is created. As al-Taftazani explains:

Striking is an attribute showing relationship which is inconceivable without the two things related, namely the striker and the one

struck, but Creating (*takwin*) is a real attribute that is the basis for the relationship, which is the bringing of the non-existent out from non-existence into existence, but not the relationship itself.⁷⁶

The Maturidites also maintained that the Attributes of act (*al-sifat al-fi'liyyah*) are eternal, although the technical distinction between them and the essential Attributes remained in their thinking. As his starting point on the Attributes, al-Maturidi had begun with the premise of God's Will, whereas al-Ash'ari had begun with God's Life, although both theologians affirmed their positions on the basis of rational proofs.⁷⁷

Regarding the traditional Sunni question of the imamate, the Maturidites affirmed the leadership and excellence of Abu Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthman, and 'Ali, on the basis of election and consensus.⁷⁸ Al-Nasafi further stated that the Muslims "must have an Imam," the qualifications of which are:

He should be of the people who have free and complete authority, an administrator, able to execute decisions and maintain the limits of the territory of the world of Islam and to give the oppressed equity against the oppressor; the Imam is not to be removed for evil-doing or tyranny.⁷⁹

While thoroughly pragmatic in nature, al-Nasafi's final clause (as we would expect) clearly echoes the Hanafi-Murji'ite doctrine that emerged out of the political chaos of the first and second *fitnahs*, thus reiterating the essential Hanafite nature of the Maturidite school of theology.

Conclusion

While both the Ash'arites and Maturidites represent Sunni orthodox theologies, the differences between the two are significant and indicate the potential for intellectual creativity within rational discourse, even when religious in nature. The blurring (or even merging) of the two schools amidst the Sunni solidarity movement of the Mamluk period, as we will examine further in chapter two, was symptomatic of a greater phenomenon taking place throughout

the Sunni Muslim world, namely the decline and demise of theology (*'ilm al-kalam*) as an active religious science. The theological doctrines of the Ash'arites and Maturidites, which form the foundational postulates of Sunni Islam (properly speaking), however implicit, are not givens, but the elaborate constructions of rigorous intellectual discourses that lasted for centuries. Those postulates, later overcome by creedalism and anti-theological Athari thought, assumed vulnerable and ossified axiomatic forms only through a complex confluence of historical events and the collapse of the theological enterprise by the fifteenth century (CE). A general awareness of the respective doctrines of both the Ash'arites and Maturidites will serve us well in the task ahead as we examine the impact of this phenomenon on certain political developments in modern Muslim societies, such as Egypt. As theological schools, both the Ash'arites and Maturidites offer us fascinating case studies of what the rationalism of theology is capable of producing in contrast to Athari thought. In chapter two, we will have the opportunity to compare their theological products to the doctrines of the anti-theological Atharis, all of them using the same textual sources, namely the Qur'an and Hadith. Then throughout the remainder of the book, we will investigate the potential sociopolitical implications of both theological and anti-theological doctrines (as the foundational postulates of Islamic systems of thought), and how they might inform and impact our understanding of the rise of Islamism in the twentieth century.

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CHAPTER 2

The Demise of *ʿIlm al-Kalam*

In general, it must be known that this science, *ʿilm al-kalam*, is not something that is necessary to the contemporary student. Heretics and innovators have been destroyed. The orthodox religious leaders have given us protection against heretics and innovators in their systematic works and treatments. Logical arguments were needed only when they defended and supported their views with them. Now all that remains of them is a certain amount of discussion, from most of whose ambiguities and inferences the Creator can be considered free.¹

—*Ibn Khaldun* (ca. 1375 CE)

Ibn Khaldun's discussion of *kalam* in the *Muqaddimah* tells us much about the state of Sunni theology in the Mamluk period. As Sunni Islam became increasingly defined, a number of factors contributed to theology's decline, some of which we find described in the *Muqaddimah*. But uncovering the factors involved in theology's decline also forces us to look elsewhere and doubt or discredit some of Ibn Khaldun's assertions. In this chapter, we will identify four key factors that contributed to the decline and virtual demise of Sunni theology, while giving special attention to the Athari anti-theological movement. Along the way, we will uncover a number of unlikely suspects and culprits, and investigate a range of clues from a variety of sources. The chapter then concludes with a very brief investigation into the history of *kalam* over the last five hundred years, reviewing

some of the isolated and failed attempts to renew Sunni theology up to the twentieth century (CE).

Atharis or Hanbalites?

The Atharis are often erroneously (but understandably) subsumed under the Hanbalite school of law (*madhhab*). This has been due, in part, to the idea of the “triumph” of theology, especially Ash‘arism, within the Shafi‘ite and Malikite *madhhab*, and the seemingly organic success of the Maturidite school of theology among the Hanafites. The Hanbalite *madhhab*, in contrast, largely maintained the traditionalist or Athari position and remained the smallest of the four legal schools, having its greatest concentrations in Arabia, Iraq (especially Baghdad), and Syria, with much smaller communities in Egypt and Persia. As such, one might think that the Athari movement (if synonymous with Hanbalism) was also relatively small, and that the areas of the Muslim world dominated by one of the three other schools of law must have been dominated by Ash‘arism or Maturidism as well; Ash‘arism among the Shafi‘ites and Malikites (e.g., Egypt and North Africa) or Maturidism among the Hanafites (e.g., Turkey and Central Asia). But this scheme is fraught with problems and exemplifies the same nagging issue that so often haunts scholars engaged in historical and textual studies, namely, that texts and written sources generally reflect only the educated elites of the societies that one studies. In the medieval Muslim world, that would mean the scholars (*ulama*), merchants, bureaucrats, landowners, or other recipients of advanced education and literacy (including the Mamluks). Texts typically tell us little about everyday people like the *fellahin* (rural peasantry) of Egypt, whose religiosity might well be described as popular, unofficial, or even superstitious and “heterodox.” If we were dealing with the present era, the anthropologist or ethnographer would undoubtedly help us a great deal in this area. But we are not. Hence, while the majority of Shafi‘ite, Malikite, and Hanafite scholars (*ulama*), administrators, and other social elites may well have been devout adherents of Ash‘arism or Maturidism, and perhaps a good segment of the general populace as well, it is unlikely that the majority of everyday people living in medieval Muslim societies had any

substantive familiarity with the often abstract, intellectual religiosity of the theologians. This stands true even today, beyond Muslim societies, in places like the United States, where a tremendous gap exists between popular notions of Christianity (whether Protestant or Catholic) among the general populace, and the Christianity of the clergy, theologians, and academics. Rather, the imaginative, narrative-centered, emotive piety of the Atharis must have retained broad appeal in the Sunni Muslim world, albeit within a range of gradations and accompanied by a good deal of religio-cultural accretions or retentions as well. This is not to say, however, that Ash'arite or Maturidite devotees among the Shafi'ite, Malikite, or Hanafite scholars and bureaucrats failed to exercise powerful influence over their communities. On the contrary, this only means that theology must have been encountered primarily (often exclusively) through the intermediary of the trusted scholar (*'alim*) or charismatic preacher (*khatib*), and the subtle yet complex distinctions between, for instance, the Ash'arite doctrine of the Qur'an and the Athari doctrine likely eluded them or were simply beyond their immediate concerns.

Conversely, when we look at Hanbalism too, we can see quite clearly that it is incorrect to consider Hanbalism and "Atharism" to be synonymous. The works of Hanbalite scholars such as Ibn 'Aqil (d. 1119 CE), Ibn al-Jawzi (d. 1201 CE), and Najm al-Din al-Tufi (d. 1316 CE), among a few others, reveal instances of distinctly theological ideas occurring within Hanbalism, making it a far more diverse tradition than one may otherwise suspect. However, the overwhelming majority of Hanbalites did indeed fall firmly within the Athari camp with its unyielding rejection of theology. The eminent Hanbalite scholar Ibn al-Jawzi, the grandfather of a well-known Hanafite jurist Sibṭ ibn al-Jawzi (d. 1257 CE), and others like him represent only a small minority that accepted the validity of *kalam* among Hanbalite scholars, perhaps even a distinctly Hanbalite school of *kalam*. It is thus on this point, as well as his attacks against certain anthropomorphic views held by many of his fellow Hanbalites, that we must exclude Ibn al-Jawzi and Hanbalite scholars like him from the ranks of the Atharis. Rather, Ibn al-Jawzi's important treatise *Kitab Akhbar as-Sifat* makes the case for his likely inclusion among the Sunni theologians (although

still a zealous opponent of Ash‘arism), for which he was harshly criticized in the works of Athari scholars such as Ibn Qudama (d. 1223 CE), Ibn Taymiyyah, and others.²

The Atharis can thus be described as a school or movement led by a contingent of scholars (*ulama*), typically Hanbalite or even Shafi‘ite, that retained influence, or at the very least a shared sentiment and conception of piety, well beyond the limited range of Hanbalite communities. This body of scholars continued to reject theology in favor of strict textualism well after Ash‘arism had infiltrated the Sunni schools of law. It is for these reasons that we must delineate the existence of a distinctly traditionalist, anti-theological movement, which defies strict identification with any particular *madhhab*, and therefore cannot be described as Hanbalite.

The Athari Creed and the Sin of Kalam

For the Athari movement, the epistemological validity of human reason is severely limited, and rational proofs can neither be trusted nor relied upon in matters of belief, thus making theology a sinful innovation (*bid‘ah*) and dangerous exercise in human arrogance. As Ahmed ibn Hanbal is reported to have said:

For indeed, (indulging in) *kalam* in the matter of *qadar*, the *ru‘ya*, the Qur’an, and other such issues are among the ways that are detested and forbidden. The one who does so, even if he reaches the truth with his words, is not from the *Ahl al-Sunnah* until he abandons this mode of argumentation, (and until he) submits and believes in the traditions.³

The sentiment of this passage is clear. For the Atharis, the “clear” (i.e., *zahir*, apparent, or literal) meaning of the Qur’an and especially the prophetic traditions (*ahadith*) have sole authority in matters of belief, as well as law, and to engage in rational disputation (*jadal*), even if one arrives at the truth, is absolutely forbidden. A strictly literal, or perhaps amodal, reading of the Qur’an, as opposed to one engaged in *ta’wil* (metaphorical interpretation), or an attempt to rationally conceptualize its meanings, cannot be questioned and the “real” meanings should be consigned to God

alone (*tafwid*). Believers should therefore refrain from trying to formulate rational coherence among contending ideas and passages from the Qur'an, traditions, or the articles of belief. When the Qur'an states, for instance, in *Surah Sad* (38:75), "Oh Iblis! What prevented you from prostrating before what I created with My [i.e., God's] hands?" one should accept that God indeed has hands (the nature of which cannot be known) and that the words *bi yadayyah* are not metaphors for God's creative power (or anything else), and do so without asking "how" (*bila kayf*) despite the anthropomorphic implications. The hostility toward theology by Athari scholars is so strong in fact that many devoted entire works to rebuking it and warning the faithful of its dangers. Two examples of such works are 'Abdallah al-Ansari al-Harawi's *Dhamm al-Kalam* ("Rebuke of Theology") and Ibn Qudama's *Tahrim an-Nazar fi Kutub Ahl al-Kalam* ("Prohibition of the Study of the Books of the Partisans of Theology").

'Abdallah al-Ansari al-Harawi (d. 1088 CE) began his life in the Shafi'ite *madhhab* before becoming a Hanbalite. Many Hanbalite writings praise his zealous devotion to the Qur'an, the sunnah, and the teachings of Ahmed ibn Hanbal. Al-Harawi's many writings, including several works on mysticism and a treatise rebuking theology titled *Dhamm al-Kalam*, were major scholarly contributions in his time. In the introduction of his *Dhamm al-Kalam*, al-Harawi begins with an explanation of the Qur'anic verse (5:3): "Today I [i.e., God] have completed for you your religion, and completed My favor unto you, and have approved for you Islam as your religion." For al-Harawi, the partisans of theology are wrongfully and needlessly engaging in disputation (*jadāl*) and *ta'wil*, even though God has clearly stated that Islam was completed in perfect form and order. The completion of Islam in the time of the Prophet and his companions (*sahabah*) was a gift of mercy from God to be gratefully accepted by all believers, not to be disputed or meddled with. There is no need to strive to understand what human beings can never truly grasp (i.e., God). Rather, human beings need only believe and obey. The believers then should "fear the hypocrites and disputers in religion and the harm of *ta'wil* to the truth of the Muslims."⁴ Al-Harawi then distinguishes between "true" scholars of the Qur'an and sunnah [i.e., Atharis] and the

theologians, relating various traditions that, in his words, “give preference to the scholars and show the stupidity of the theologians, because *kalam* leads to heresy or because the theologian comes from Satan.”⁵ The reader will, of course, note that there were no Muslim theologians (nor was there any need for them!) during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad, thus making any *ahadith* ascribing rebuke of *kalam* (among many other things) to the Prophet clear fabrications, especially those identifying particular groups or schools of thought. Traditions ascribed to Ahmed ibn Hanbal have also been fabricated, with Athari scholars citing his alleged rebuke of al-Ash‘ari and his followers, despite the fact that Ibn Hanbal died some eighteen years before al-Ash‘ari was even born and almost sixty years before he joined the ranks of the *Kullabiyyah* (the theological precursors of the Ash‘arites), or that no such school of al-Ash‘ari, as the eponym, even existed until the end of the tenth century (CE).

The Athari scholar Muwaffaq ad-Din ibn Qudama was born near Jerusalem in 1146 CE and studied with the greatest Hanbalite scholars of his time in Damascus and Baghdad. His well-known anti-theological treatise *Tahrim an-Nazar fi Kutub Ahl al-Kalam* harshly rebuked theology as one of the worst of all heresies. He characterized its partisans, the theologians, as innovators and heretics who had betrayed and deviated from the simple and pious faith of the *salaf* (“pious ancestors”). He writes:

[The theologians] are intensely hated in this world, and they will be tortured in the next. None among them will prosper, nor will he succeed in following the right direction... Every theologian belongs to the partisans of erroneous opinions and heretical innovations, be he Ash‘arite or not. No testimony should be accepted; he should be ostracized, and punished for his heretical innovation; and if he sticks to it, he should be made to retract it.⁶

For Ibn Qudama and other Athari scholars, the path to salvation was very clear. The religion of the *salaf* was one of simple submission to God and His Messenger through strict adherence to the letter of the Qur‘an and sunnah and believing in their content without asking *kayf* (“how”). Believing was enough. “For the

Prophet did not order any one of his community to learn theology that one might thereby know the soundness of his creed," he writes, "[rather] he was contented with their pure and simple submission to God."⁷ The emphasis on creed (*'aqidah*), rather than theology (a distinction often overlooked) in this passage is an extremely important one.

The rejection of rational contemplation of the Qur'an, *ahadith*, and articles of belief developed into a set of doctrines that were quite different from those of the Sunni theologians. These distinctly Athari doctrines were then propagated in the form of creedal statements (*'aqa'id*) free from the perplexing proofs that characterized theological treatises, save for frequent citations from the Qur'an and *ahadith*. Rational proofs, unless they were Qur'anic in origin, were nonexistent and considered wholly invalid. The interested reader may, in fact, find Athari creeds rather unsatisfying and ambiguous, as they typically leave a great deal unanswered. This is, however, entirely deliberate and precisely the point; thus the formula *bila kayf*. The Athari creed entitled *'Aqidah al-Wasitiyyah*, written by the famous and influential Athari scholar Ahmed ibn Taymiyyah, is an excellent example. The *Wasitiyyah* creed, it is said, was written in response to the plea of a Shafi'ite pilgrim from Iraq who was troubled by the ignorance of Islam among his people under Mongol rule in the thirteenth century (CE). The fact that the request came from a Shafi'ite should not surprise us. Rather, it only reinforces the idea that a faction of Shafi'ites continued to adhere to Athari doctrines and resisted the progress of Ash'arism within their *madhhab* long after the efforts of the great Ash'arite theologians of the eleventh and twelfth centuries (CE). But perhaps, in this case, the brutal destruction of the Mongol hordes is inferred, having devastated institutions of Muslim learning to such an extent that they had yet to recover by the time of the pilgrim's request and Ash'arism was simply experiencing a temporary hiatus of sorts. Regardless of the answer, the creed that Ibn Taymiyyah produced in response to the Shafi'ite pilgrim's request is a prime example of an Athari creed and continues to be well circulated to this day.⁸

Ibn Taymiyyah was a brilliant jurist and scholar from the time he was a teenager. He was appointed as the leading professor of

the Sukariyyah *madrassa* in Damascus at the age of twenty-one.⁹ Throughout his life, he made no secret of his disapproval and rejection of *kalam* and Ash‘arism, among other groups (e.g., Shi’ites), and earned many enemies who deemed him, in turn, an anthropomorphist and a heretic. The charge of anthropomorphism was, perhaps, not entirely unwarranted, but one that Ibn Taymiyyah certainly rejected. For instance, in an account related in the travel log, *al-Rihlah*, of the famous fourteenth-century traveler Ibn Battutah (d. 1377 CE), Ibn Taymiyyah is said to have illustrated a particular prophetic tradition during a Friday sermon by acting out God’s own reported action. He relates:

One of the principal Hanbalite doctors at Damascus was Ibn Taymiyyah, a man of great ability and wide learning, but with some kink in his brain. The people of Damascus idolized him . . . I was in Damascus at the time and attended the service which he was conducting one Friday, as he was addressing and admonishing the people from the pulpit. In the midst of his discourse he said “Verily God descends to the sky over our world [from Heaven] in the same bodily fashion that I make this descent,” and stepped down one step of the pulpit. A Malikite doctor present contradicted him and objected to his statement, but the common people rose up against this doctor and beat him with their hands and their shoes.¹⁰

Anthropomorphism (*tashbih*) was commonly alleged against Athari scholars by their critics, including the Hanbalite scholar and theologian Ibn al-Jawzi. Indeed, in some cases Athari scholars did espouse extreme anthropomorphic views, but these instances do not generally represent the Athari movement as a whole. However, providing further strength to these allegations, Athari creeds also affirmed that the beatific vision entailed that God would be seen within a spatial locality, thereby implying substance or a body. The Atharis also asserted that God sits down upon the Throne, which was clearly a material object. In response to any criticism, whether from Ash‘arites or others, Athari scholars replied that they say nothing more than what God and His Messenger have said, and “he who finds fault with the Book of God and the sunnah of His Apostle is not a Muslim.”¹¹ The Atharis furthermore defined *iman* (“faith”), and thus the qualifications of a

believer, as utterance and action. *Iman* resides in the heart, in the utterance of the tongue, and in the action of the limbs. As Ibn Taymiyyah states in the *Wasitiyyah* creed:

Among the fundamentals of the people of the *sunnah* is that religion and faith are utterance and action—the utterance of the heart and the tongue and the action of the heart, the tongue and the limbs—and that faith increases with obedience and decreases with disobedience.¹²

The *iman* of the Atharis then is tangible, observable, and verifiable. In light of their anthropomorphic tendencies, it should be expected that if God is a corporeal entity of material substance that can be seen, located, and who performs physical actions, then faith itself should also exist in the body, as clear and apparent as the meanings of the Qur'an and *ahadith*.

On the subject of the Qur'an, or the "Speech of God," the Atharis affirmed that every part of the Qur'an is uncreated (*ghayr makhluq*) from its verbal recitation to its Arabic letters written down on paper by human hands. It is reported that Ahmed ibn Hanbal, who was among the staunchest defenders of the doctrine of the uncreated Qur'an, which was the source of his suffering during the 'Abbasid *Mihna* (inquisition) in the early ninth century (CE), once declared:

The Qur'an is God's Speech, which He expressed; it is uncreated. He who claims the opposite is a Jahmite, an infidel. And he who says, "The Qur'an is God's Speech," and stops there without adding "uncreated," speaks even more abominably than the former. He who maintains that our sounds (which render the Qur'an) and our recitation of the Qur'an are created, is (also) a Jahmite, and he who does not declare all those people infidels is like them! God spoke to Moses with His mouth and put the Torah into his hand with His own hand.¹³

The degree of literalism and absolutism in the Athari position, as presented in this passage, is quite clear. In the Athari view, anyone that expresses even simple indecision over the nature of the Qur'an, or, like the Ash'arites, considers the verbal expression or written letters

of the Qur'an to be created, is no different than one who denies its uncreated nature altogether (e.g., the Mu'tazilites). Such people are guilty of unbelief (*kufri*) and may be excluded from membership in the community (or at least the "saved" community), and perhaps, in the most extreme circumstances, even forfeit their life and property. Furthermore, the assertion that, as Ibn Taymiyyah stated, "Allah truly uttered it" (i.e., the Qur'an) only reiterates once again the basis for alleged Athari anthropomorphic tendencies (even if the assertions are ostensibly amodal), because it appears to ascribe to God an uttering facility (e.g., a mouth).

As for the Divine Attributes, the Atharis staunchly affirmed their existence and considered all of them to be equally eternal, thus rejecting the Ash'arite notion of seven essential Attributes that subsist in the Divine Essence. As Ibn Qudama related from a tradition ascribed to Ibn Hanbal: "His Attributes proceed from Him and are His own, we do not go beyond the Qur'an or the traditions from the Prophet and his Companions; nor do we know the how of these, save by the acknowledgment of the Apostle and the confirmation of the Qur'an."¹⁴ If this passage is any indication, Athari explanations regarding God's *qadar* are equally unsatisfying, exhibiting strong Jabrite (i.e., predestinarian) leanings and yet still curiously defending the moral responsibility of human beings and their ultimate judgment before God. Generally speaking, there appears to be no articulation of the doctrine of *kash* ("acquisition") in Athari creeds.

The affirmation of the collective probity of the Prophet's companions, the *sahabah*, as well as the suspension of judgment over the events of the first *fitnah*, came to form a fundamental component of Athari beliefs by the lifetime of Ibn Hanbal.¹⁵ In the Athari view, the thousands of believing men and women who lived during the time of the Prophet were superior to all other generations in history. The knowledge and piety that the *sahabah* possessed, regardless of their quarrels, are worthy of emulation by all Muslims and treated as exemplary behavior in accordance with the Prophet's sunnah. After all, the companions had received their knowledge of Islam directly from the Prophet himself. The reports that the companions carried down to subsequent generations, as well as their consensus (*ijma*) on matters of proper belief and practice, served as a guiding light for the community in the absence of the Messenger (i.e., following his

death). This knowledge, or the oral traditions ascribed as such, was effectively sacrosanct and not to be questioned. The period during which the Medinan city-state existed under the rule of the Prophet and his immediate four successors, who were all *sahabah*, thus became fixed as an eternal paradigm during which all necessary knowledge of God's religion had been attained and the model society and political order were established for all time.

Judging by the creeds produced by Athari scholars and their adamant rejection of theology, we might think that Athari scholars were opposed to rational discourse in toto, or that they were all intellectual simpletons. But this was certainly not the case. Even among Athari scholars, rationalism often had its place, even if they imposed severe restrictions on it. Ibn Taymiyyah, for example, produced a commentary and refutation of Ibn Sina's (d. 1037 CE) *al-Risalat al-Adhawiyyah* ("Treatise on the Resurrection"), in which he engaged the complex rationalist arguments of both Muslim philosophers (*falasifah*) and theologians with great competence. In fact, the prominent Shafi'ite Athari scholar Shams al-Din al-Dhahabi (d. 1348 CE) was so offended by Ibn Taymiyyah's erudite abilities that he accused him of becoming "poisoned by philosophy," despite the fact that he was, of course, employing such methods as a means of refuting both the philosophers and the theologians and championing Athari textualism.¹⁶ We must not then think that Atharis abhorred rationalism or science as such (e.g., medicine, engineering, astronomy, etc.) or that they advocated a retreat into a world of primitive simplicity, even if that may be true for some. We must instead resist excessive monolithic conceptions of the anti-theological movement in Sunni Islam and recognize the existence of different gradations of Athari thought. But the essence of the Athari movement remains the same, namely, a shared rejection of the formulation of the articles of belief through rational discourse known as *kalam*, or theology, in favor of strict unquestioning adherence to the outward meanings of the Qur'an, traditions, and the way of the *salaf*.

The anti-theological stance of the Atharis does have a unique quality of sophistication and rhetorical power. It may also afford a cathartic existential service to its partisans that the perplexing rationalism and terminology of the theologians cannot always provide.

But we must not lose sight of the fact that the unwavering centrality of revelation in Athari thought, and the rejection of the rational investigation of its tenets and content (observable through the doctrines of their creedal pronouncements), necessarily imposes formidable intellectual barriers that can then be imposed, in turn, upon fragile sociopolitical realities in which human minds and lives are held captive. The rigid absolutism of Athari thought adamantly rejects creativity and dissent in thought or opinion, as well as action or behavior, while enshrining the past as a mythic paradigm, despite the steady advance of time, and defends a tangible binary conception of the world with a moral certainty that staunchly resists rational intercession. This is not to say, however, that the theologians or their partisans were always a bastion of tolerance and free inquiry. Adherence to any religion necessarily imposes certain limitations on proper thought and behavior, which can become all the more formidable (even malicious) when allied with political power. But the difference remains that the theologians established an intellectual platform on which the content and tenets of revelation and all religious beliefs could be rationally discussed, advanced, and subjected to debate and revision, in a complex world that is more often shades of gray than absolutes of black and white. As such, there is little wonder that Islamic civilization reached its zenith when theological discourse was at its most vibrant.

Four Factors in Kalam's Decline

In the *Muqaddimah*, Ibn Khaldun provides two explanations for the decline of Sunni theology by his own lifetime in the fourteenth century (CE), which, we will assume, carried over to its virtual demise in the fifteenth century. The first of his explanations is that theology was no longer necessary because the enemies of the “orthodox faith” had been defeated. The second explanation is that philosophy had infiltrated the ideas and works of the theologians, thus confusing the two disciplines and making the works of subsequent theologians unusable. Regarding the first, Ibn Khaldun rightfully notes the defensive, polemical component of theology. However, how or why he claims that “heretics” and “innovators” have been destroyed is certainly curious. Who

exactly are the heretics and innovators that theology destroyed? Muʿtazilism had certainly become increasingly rare among Sunnis by this period (although not among Zaydi and Imami Shiʿites), but many other opponents remained and the Islamic world of the fourteenth century was certainly not homogenous. We will, however, resist the urge to produce a heresiography here, and conclude that his remarks are likely in reference to the successes and aspirations of the Sunni solidarity movement of the Mamluk era. Whatever the case, we will disregard this explanation as highly tenuous (even wishful thinking) and little help in our task. Ibn Khaldun's second explanation, noting the damage that *falsafah* ("philosophy") had done to theology, cannot be so easily overlooked. In this section we will examine four factors that contributed to the decline of *kalam* by the fifteenth century. These factors are: (1) the persistence and popular influence of the Athari anti-theological movement; (2) the blurring of the boundaries between *kalam* and *falsafah*; (3) the growth of Islamic mysticism, known as Sufism; (4) the "creedal collapse" that emerged out of the Sunni solidarity movement during the Mamluk era.

1. The Persistence of Tradition: To Baghdad and Beyond

Despite the development and widespread (but gradual) success of the Sunni theological schools, Athari textualism has always persisted. The idea of the "triumph" of Ashʿarism and Maturidism and their synthesis as (in the words of Francis Robinson) "the classic Sunni theological position" only encourages us to overlook the persistence of the Atharis as a remnant of the past, especially in the Arab Middle East. But the "old orthodoxy," as Goldziher called it, has been a constant throughout Islamic history, continuing the struggle against theology and capitalizing on opportunities whenever they present themselves. The discovery of oil in the twentieth century, for instance, benefited certain Athari factions a great deal. Saudi Arabia has used its tremendous oil wealth to propagate Wahhabism throughout the world through missionaries, publications, and the construction of new mosques and Islamic centers.

At the turn of the eleventh century (CE), Shiʿism's power was ascendant in the form of the Fatimids, Buyids, and the infamous

Nizari Ismaili Assassins. The 'Abbasid caliphate had become a minor power under the authority of Buyid overlords from northern Persia, and the triumph of the Sunni Turks still remained decades away. But sectarian strife, as well as the rise of Mahmud of Ghazni (d. 1030 CE), increasingly emboldened the 'Abbasid caliph al-Qadir (d. 1031 CE) to reassert his allegiance to Sunni Islam as the one true faith. He challenged Shi'ite sovereignty in Baghdad, a stronghold of Hanbalism at the time, in 1018 CE by ordering a creed to be read from the royal palace and the mosques, known as *al-I'tiqad al-Qadiriyyah*.¹⁷ The *Qadiriyyah* creed was thoroughly Athari in nature and reflected the influence of two of Baghdad's most renowned Hanbalite scholars, Ibn Batta al-'Ukbari (d. 997 CE) and Ibn Hamid (d. 1012 CE).¹⁸ W. Montgomery Watt has written that al-Qadir's creed was "the most effective" way of "strengthening Sunni views among the masses."¹⁹ But al-Qadir also had few options. The traditionalists still dominated the Sunni schools of law, which were not yet infiltrated by the Ash'arites, and the Maturidites still remained in obscurity in distant Samarqand among the Eastern Hanafites. The Mu'tazilites, some of whom were Shi'ites, and other theological schools of the age, offered few incentives for a caliph seeking popular support for a revolt against Shi'ism in the name of the sunnah and the way of the Prophet's companions. In fact, under al-Qadir's reign, any judges or witnesses suspected of having Mu'tazilite leanings were forced to make public renunciations and the dissemination of Mu'tazilite teachings was severely restricted.²⁰ In recent years, Mohammed Arkoun has consistently lamented these events, arguing that the *Qadiriyyah* creed effectively "banned" Mu'tazilism and banished the idea of the created Qur'an to the realm of the "unthinkable."²¹ But this was not the case. Strong opposition to Mu'tazilism had always existed, and while the *Qadiriyyah* creed was most certainly anti-Mu'tazilite, as well as anti-Ash'arite, anti-Karramite, and anti-Shi'ite, Mu'tazilism still enjoyed relative success under the Seljuks before the Maturidites came to dominate Hanafite theology. As such, while it is true that Athari thought, with the aid (later on) of the Ash'arites and the Maturidites, did indeed eliminate Mu'tazilism from Sunni Islam and confined its ideas to the realm of the unthinkable, it was a far more gradual event (several centuries in fact) and can hardly be

reduced to a particular historical moment or attributed to al-Qadir and his creed. Watt, for instance, relates that in 1068 CE, just fifty years after the first proclamation of the creed in Baghdad, a large protest was staged by a group of Atharis, led by the Sharif Abu Jafar, against the renewal of Muʿtazilite teaching under the rule of the Seljuk Hanafites.²² The great conqueror Timur Lenk (d. 1405 CE) is also said to have had a Muʿtazilite-Hanafite theologian with him during his campaigns over three hundred years later. Hence, Arkoun should more rightly lament (if necessary) the success of the Maturidites, being the leading force behind the Hanafite shift away from Muʿtazilism (its final stronghold among Sunni Muslims), rather than the proclamation of the *Qadiriyyah* creed. But the Athari effort to eliminate the teachings of the Muʿtazilite theologians is certainly duly noted.

Following al-Qadir's death, his son and successor al-Qa'im (d. 1075 CE) continued his father's allegiance to the *Qadiriyyah* creed. Al-Qa'im's reign also benefited from the defeat of the Buyids by the Sunni Seljuk Turks, although the Hanafite Turks were hardly the ideal sovereigns for a Hanbalite caliph. The victory of the Turks would, however, mark a period of success for Athari thought and serious trials for their enemies, the theologians. For example, the aforementioned Athari scholar of Herat ʿAbdullah al-Ansari al-Harawi issued his scathing attacks against theology during this period, and along with other Athari scholars branded the Ashʿarites as heretics and disbelievers for their rationalist methods. The Ashʿarites, in turn, faced serious persecution and zealous opposition from both the Atharis (principally among the Hanbalites) and the Hanafites, who included Muʿtazilites, Maturidites, and even distinctly Hanafite Atharis among their ranks.²³

With the decline of the Seljuk Empire (the "Great Seljuks") at the close of the eleventh century (CE), the era of the Seljuk successor states allowed the ʿAbbasid caliphs to recover a degree of power and autonomy.²⁴ Most maintained their allegiance to Hanbalism and Athari creedalism, helping to secure Baghdad as the leading center of Athari thought. However, theology also succeeded in making inroads among the Hanbalites at this time (e.g., Ibn ʿAqil, Ibn al-Jawzi), provoking the wrath of Athari scholars, such as Ibn Qudama, and fomenting considerable strife within the Hanbalite *madhhab*. But in 1258 CE,

the Mongols advanced from the east and sacked Baghdad, killing the caliph, massacring its inhabitants, and razing its great libraries and institutions of learning to the ground. The center of Athari thought subsequently shifted to Damascus, already a stronghold of Hanbalism and Athari thought, where it remained throughout the Mamluk period. In Damascus, Ahmed ibn Taymiyyah and his student Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah (d. 1350 CE) were the leading Athari scholars of the age.

In 1453 CE, the Ottoman Turks conquered Constantinople and stretched their empire across the Middle East, ending the reign of the Mamluks in 1517. At present, little attention has been given to the history of the Hanbalites and Atharis after the time of Ibn Taymiyyah and his students in Damascus, leaving an area for future research. It is safe to assume, however, that anti-theological sentiment remained strong well into the fifteenth century and had not been eliminated by the theological schools. We know, for instance, that the Najd region of Arabia remained a stronghold of Athari thought, having resisted the encroachment of the ostensibly Maturidite Ottomans, whose sovereignty in Arabia remained concentrated in the Hijaz. It was in the Najd, after all, that Muhammad ibn ‘Abdul Wahhab (d. 1792) was born to a Hanbalite family and initiated his puritanical reformist *Muwahhidun* sect, the genealogy of which clearly belongs to the Atharis. However, “Wahhabism” also admittedly departs from other Athari factions in significant ways, just as it remains distinct from Hanbalism. We will note, for instance, that the study or teaching of *kalam* remains illegal today in the Wahhabite state of Saudi Arabia.²⁵ But the teachings of the Wahhabites carry their own distinctive features, including a zealous *takfiri* element suggesting a resemblance to the *khawarij* (Kharijites). The Wahhabites also strongly opposed mysticism, a feature typically thought to reflect the influence of Ibn Taymiyyah. However, contrary to popular perception, Ibn Taymiyyah only opposed what he saw as certain Sufi excesses (both in belief and practice) that violated the strict parameters of the Qur’an and *ahadith* and never mysticism as such. He was, in fact, an initiate into the *Qadiriyyah* Sufi order (not to be confused with the creed), as was his student Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah who took an even greater interest in Sufism than his master.²⁶ Al-Ansari al-Harawi was also a prominent Sufi

and wrote a number of important works on mysticism. These figures were hardly exceptions either. As such, the Atharis have never been opposed to Sufism, but only to certain excesses and violations of scriptural dictates, whether in mysticism or in any area of Islamic thought. Wahhabism then is justifiably characterized as a distinct sectarian movement with its own idiosyncrasies that diverge from other Athari movements. But it nevertheless remains thoroughly Athari in nature. The ideas of the Atharis of the Najd were not limited to Wahhabites either, but can be traced elsewhere, especially to Iraq (e.g., al-Alusi family), India, as well as to the figures such as Rashid Rida (d. 1935 CE) and Hasan al-Banna (d. 1949 CE) in Egypt. Indeed, it is this modern lineage of the Athari movement that will ultimately lead us to the figure of 'Umar al-Tilmisani (d. 1986 CE) and the next portion of our study.

2. Blurring the Boundaries: The Encroachment of Philosophy

The distinction between *kalam* (theology) and *falsafah* (philosophy) had become increasingly vague by the fourteenth century (CE), beginning, according to Ibn Khaldun, with the works of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali and Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (Ibn al-Khatib) in the eleventh and twelfth centuries (CE). Of course, neither of these scholars were philosophers (both would have been horrified at the suggestion), but in formulating their refutations of the *falasifah*, the Ash'arite theologians incorporated elements of their arguments, particularly in their use of logic. Thus, while Ibn Rushd's (d. 1198 CE) later rebuttal of al-Ghazali's *Tahafut al-Falasifah* had failed, al-Ghazali's attack against *falsafah* had also succeeded (ironically) in initiating a "mixing" of the two opposing disciplines. As subsequent Ash'arite scholars, such as Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, continued in this direction, theology became vulnerable to the same attacks previously dispensed against *falsafah*, especially from the Atharis, and to an intellectual elitism that increasingly alienated it from the Muslim masses, as well as the theological works and doctrines of earlier generations. This trend likely also contributed to an already existing scholarly opposition toward recording the doctrines and arguments of one's opponents in theological treatises, favoring instead the production of strictly creedal formulations (see factor

four later). As such, Ibn Khaldun understandably writes of the state of theology in his lifetime: "The problems of theology have been confused with those of philosophy. This has gone so far that one discipline is no longer distinguishable from the other. The student of theology cannot learn theology from the books of the recent scholars."²⁷ By the fourteenth century, theological treatises (and even certain creeds) had become saturated by the language, presuppositions, and even elements of the doctrines of the *falasifah*. Ibn Khaldun thus advised his readers to study the *Kitab al-Irshad* of the Ash'arite scholar al-Juwayni, and the works of earlier theologians (e.g., al-Baqillani, al-Qushayri) if interested in learning the doctrines and arguments of "orthodox" Sunni theology. Last, if it is any indication, the contemporary Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi exemplified this confusion only further in a telling but erroneous statement in her 1992 book *Islam and Democracy: Fear of the Modern World*, relating that "the activity of the *falasifah* was called *kalam*."²⁸

3. The Rise of Mysticism and the Sufi Orders

Mysticism has always had considerable influence on Islamic thought, perhaps as early as the seventh century (CE), and even, arguably, with the Prophet Muhammad himself.²⁹ But by the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (CE), Islamic mysticism had assumed new forms and become a considerable force amidst the serious epistemological tensions of the age. Wandering ascetic masters were now increasingly replaced by mystical orders and fraternities (*tariqat*), such as the *Suhrawardiyyah* and the *Qadiriyyah*, characterized by distinctive hierarchical societies, replete with saints, adepts, disciples, and popular followings.³⁰ Acquiescence in mysticism or the Sufi path increasingly circumvented rationalist theological methods through recourse to methods of direct communication with God, either through contemplation or ecstatic union.³¹ This development had already been foreseen in the person of the Ash'arite theologian Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, who, after accepting the Sufi path (albeit without a *shaykh*), wrote of his views on *kalam*:

As to [the benefits of theology, some] think that it is useful in revealing realities and knowing them as they really are. But how

far from the truth this is, because the fulfillment of noble desire is not found in disputation. In fact the perplexity and confusion consequent on disputation surpasses anything which it may reveal or unfold . . . Take it from one who has familiarized himself with disputation and, after careful study and a thorough investigation of it in which he surpassed the extreme limits of his masters and went even further . . . has come to dislike it, and has ascertained that the road to the realities of knowledge is closed from this direction.³²

Al-Ghazali's conclusion was certainly a devastating blow to theology, and his *Ihya* (in which this passage appears) has since been studied for centuries throughout the Muslim world. But *kalam* was not entirely useless for al-Ghazali either. As Richard M. Frank, Oliver Leaman, and others have argued, al-Ghazali did remain an Ash'arite for the rest of his life, despite his intellectual idiosyncrasies.³³ For al-Ghazali, theology was still useful as a means to preserve the creed of the orthodox and to "safeguard it against the confusion of innovators by different kinds of argumentation."³⁴ But it should be restricted exclusively to the scholars who "should be like the physician who is adept in the use of dangerous drugs, which he does not apply except to the right place and only at the time of need."³⁵ In support of this limited utility, al-Ghazali even included his concise Ash'arite treatise *al-Risalah al-Qudsiyyah* ("The Jerusalem Epistle") alongside his critique of *kalam* in the *Ihya*, in order to, as he put it, safeguard "the children" from innovators and heretics.³⁶ Nevertheless, the damage to theology was done.

Al-Ghazali of course was a representative of an orthodox mysticism that maintained devotion to the *shari'ah* and Sunni Islam, qualities that we continue to see in orders like the *Naqshbandiyyah*. But many other Sufi orders had little interest in preserving "orthodoxy" in their mystical pursuits. This latter form can be observed vividly in the figure of Muhyidin Muhammad Ibn al-'Arabi (d. 1240 CE) and his quasi-pantheistic theory of *Wahdat al-Wujud*.³⁷ Enormously influential, Ibn al-'Arabi's ideas spread quickly throughout the Muslim world and gained innumerable followers, mainly in Persian and Turkish speaking areas, having special appeal among the masses.³⁸ His theological Sufism not only besieged *kalam*, but orthodox Sunnism in

toto, and from the fourteenth century (CE) onward, even mystics who did not accept his theories remained “spellbound by his terminology and used it very freely.”³⁹ The perceptible, created world, he argued, was merely nonessential surface phenomena hiding the true reality of the oneness of the Divine Being, making the sciences of jurisprudence and theology, as well as the scholars and institutions devoted to them, largely superfluous.⁴⁰ *Wahdat al-Wujud* thus cultivated instead the veneration of saints, culminating with the Prophet Muhammad, and the quest toward self-annihilation (*fana*) in which the unity of all things would ultimately be unveiled.⁴¹ This was the very sort of mysticism that Ibn Taymiyyah and other Athari scholars, as well as many orthodox Sunni scholars, so adamantly (and understandably) opposed.

The mystical pursuit of experiential knowledge, whether orthodox or not, seriously challenged theology’s claims to the acquisition of knowledge through rationalist methods, and even questioned the authority of orthodox institutions. In so doing, these Sufi masters and orders made regular use of exquisite poetry (often written in colloquial languages), music, dance, and the arts to express their emotional religiosity and reach out to the masses, especially beyond the urban centers of the empires, and enthrall them with a religion of direct experience and saintly personalities from whom divine grace radiated at all times, even after death. There is little wonder then why many, unsatisfied with tiresome legalities or the intellectualism of the theologians, would seek respite and grace in their circles. However, this is not to say that mysticism did not have its limits as well, and political powers were often careful to keep the orders in check (spurred on by the defenders of the law and tradition), but mysticism’s contribution to the decline of theology simply cannot be overlooked.

4. Sunni Solidarity and the Creedal Collapse

Prior to the reign of the Ayyubids in the twelfth century (CE), Sunnism was marred by intense factionalism and partisan conflict. In the years following the bitter struggles of the Seljuk era, the rulers of the successor states, especially the Zangid Sultan Nur al-Din (d. 1174 CE), encouraged Sunni solidarity and stability against Shi‘ism and

the Crusaders.⁴² Salah al-Din (d. 1193 CE), Nur al-Din's senior officer, continued this policy with great success, and famously amassed a large Muslim force to recapture Jerusalem from the Crusaders in 1187 CE. After his death, the dynasty he established in Egypt, the Ayyubids, continued to foster peaceful coexistence between the Shafi'ites, Hanafites, Hanbalites, and Malikites. The foundation of joint madrasas (seminaries) shared by two *madhhab*, most often Shafi'ites and Hanafites, became common under Ayyubid rule.⁴³ The *Dar al-Hadith al-Kamiliyyah* was also founded in Egypt in 1222 CE to teach the points of law held in common among all four Sunni schools of law, and in 1239 CE the *madrasa al-Salhiyyah* was founded to house all four schools.⁴⁴ The Mamluks, the successors of the Ayyubids in the thirteenth century (CE), championed the equality of the four *madhhab* even further, with the Mamluk sultan Baybars I, in one instance, replacing the single Shafi'ite *qadi* in Cairo with four independent chief *qadis* representing each of the four *madhhab*.⁴⁵ The exquisite mosque and *madrasa* of Sultan Hasan in Cairo, which features four massive vaulted chambers representing each of the four *madhhab*, remains today a monumental testimony to the Mamluk project of Sunni solidarity. It was thus during the reign of the Mamluks, as noted at the onset of chapter one, that the Sunni solidarity movement took real shape, and the distinctions between Ash'arism and Maturidism were deliberately played down and minimized.

The differences between the schools of Sunni theology (as well as the Atharis) are frequently found in the details. This inevitably brings us to the important distinction between the concepts of "theology" and "creed." Works of theology (*kalam*) contain proofs, expositions, and rebuttals of the doctrines and arguments of one's doctrinal opponents. Creeds (*ʿaqā'id*), on the other hand, are merely statements of the proper articles of belief (*usul al-din*), and are generally intended to tell us *what* to believe but not *how* or *why*. As detailed in chapter one, the Ash'arites and Maturidites both agree that the Qur'an is the uncreated Speech of God, but significant, even antagonistic, differences are revealed when we look at the details of their respective doctrines. In other words, where there is agreement in *creedal* forms, there may be disagreement in *theological* forms. The aspirations and success of the Sunni solidarity movement thus

understandably necessitated a transition away from the latter toward a more stable, fixed, distinctly creedal enterprise. This new science was no longer *‘ilm al-kalam*, but *usul al-din*. The vibrant theological treatises of the past, which once responded to the intellectual and spiritual challenges of the day, now effectively ceased. There were, admittedly, certain advantages to this development, such as increased communal stability and unity, but in doing so, the Sunni solidarity movement also relieved the Atharis of the yoke of Sunni theology, and the creedal collapse would ultimately be to their benefit. As such, the term “creedal collapse” refers to the reduction of theological proofs and the intellectual efforts that produced them to fixed creedal postulates, as one might imagine an exquisite tower having its foundations removed and then collapsing to the ground, leaving only its once lofty peak to be observed, and, in time, mistaken for the tower itself; the architects, scale, and majesty of the original having been long since forgotten.

Conclusion: Attempts to Revive Kalam up to the Twentieth Century

After asserting its demise, Ibn Khaldun remarks in the closing passages of his discussion of *kalam* that “the usefulness of theology for certain individuals and students is [still] considerable, [and] orthodox Muslims should not be ignorant of theological argument in defense of the orthodox faith.”⁴⁶ But from the sixteenth century onward, Muslim scholars and institutions generally failed to heed his advice. The creedal enterprise, of course, continued, producing many commentaries, super-commentaries, and glosses, such as those of Birgevi (d. 1573), al-Laḡani (d. 1631), al-Siyalkuti (d. 1657), and al-Bajuri (d. 1860), but works of theology remained sparse, and emerged only in isolated instances, receiving little popular or scholarly attention.⁴⁷ Strangely, among all the creeds and commentaries of the last five centuries, almost none appear to be Maturidite, although the distinction between the two schools was admittedly blurred (but hardly merged). In fact, Watt once wrote that it is “difficult to know what happened” to Maturidite theology after the fourteenth century (CE) and that Maturidism only “presumably continued to exist” along with the Hanafites under the Ottoman

Empire.⁴⁸ More recently, however, the Bosnian Azhar-educated *ʿalim* Mustafa Ceriç has argued that the reason for this apparent silence, referring to the fact that Maturidites never added “anything substantial to the [initial] theological thought of al-Maturidi,” was that the eponym had already perfected a “definite methodological system.”⁴⁹ While this may be true, Ceriç’s explanation sounds woefully apologetic, especially from a Maturidite scholar who is hardly a disinterested observer. Indeed, Ceriç dedicates a good deal of ink to extolling the virtues and superiority of Maturidite theology over Ashʿarism in his study *Roots of Synthetic Theology in Islam*, even arguing that al-Maturidi, rather than al-Ashʿari, “should be the model for a serious modern orthodox theological perspective.”⁵⁰ But in this respect Ceriç is rather unique, as most twentieth-century works interested in renewing *kalam* typically dispense with Sunni theology altogether in favor of Muʿtazilism (if not *falsafah*). Of those, as it has often been said, was the reformist Azharite shaykh Muhammad ʿAbduh (d. 1905 CE).⁵¹

ʿAbduh’s famous treatise *Risalat al-Tawhid* is perhaps the best-known theological text of the modern period, a fact that says far more about the state of Sunni theology than it does about the merit or significance of the treatise itself. Rather, ʿAbduh’s treatise is far more interested in defending the compatibility of Islam with modern European scientific discoveries by demonstrating its “inherent” rationalism and responding to embarrassing European criticism of Islam than it does in exhuming the rich theological discourses of the past. Admittedly, theology is certainly a science aimed at defending the faith against its detractors, but there is a difference between apologetics and theology. ʿAbduh’s theological ideas, in fact, appear as a sort of hodgepodge, a modernist collection of a tiny smattering of Muʿtazilite, Maturidite, and Ashʿarite ideas, woven together to achieve (albeit ineffectively) the aforementioned task. For instance, while ʿAbduh apparently adhered to the Muʿtazilite doctrine of the Qurʾan as the *created* Speech of God (although it was removed from later editions of the text), he also affirmed the Divine Attributes (a fundamental component of Sunni theology), the denial of which is the basis for the Muʿtazilite doctrine.⁵² Altogether, there is little in *Risalat al-Tawhid* to warrant comparison to any of the major theological texts of either

the Ash‘arite or Maturidite schools (both topically and in terms of proofs), regardless of the fact that ‘Abduh admirably refused to adhere to the stagnant products of the existing creedal enterprise. He also, we will note, drew attention to the need for theology (and thus its absence) in his time, stressing that only a few scholars had any access to the works of the great Sunni theologians of the past and that these works were unavailable to the people, fostering a general ignorance of theological principles.⁵³

The nineteenth century witnessed other attempts to revive *kalam* as well, particularly in the Indian subcontinent and the fading Ottoman Empire. In virtually every case, the approach to *kalam* was a narrow one and thoroughly modernist in nature. Like ‘Abduh, aspiring Ottoman and Indian “theologians” saw the development of a new *kalam* as a way of adopting and disseminating modern European scientific advances within a broader modernizing program aimed at the reform and rejuvenation of Muslim societies. In many instances, these modernist works continued to confuse philosophy with theology. For example, the *Yeni ‘Ilm al-Kalam* (“New Theology”) of the Ottoman “theologian” Izmirli Isma’il Haqqi (d. 1946 CE) drew from the work of Descartes and Comte and lamented the defeat of Aristotelian philosophy in Islamic thought.⁵⁴ Others pursued similar methods, including figures from the contemporary period, but we need not concern ourselves yet with the state of theology after the lifetime of ‘Umar al-Tilmisani. Certainly the most curious aspect of these failed attempts to renew *kalam* is the fact that virtually all of them insisted on using ideas and doctrines long ago deemed heretical and outside of Sunni Islam, especially Mu‘tazilism and *falsafah*, thus undermining the credibility and appeal of their efforts from the very start. A true revival of *kalam*, it would seem, would necessitate a thorough reengagement with Ash‘arism, or, as Ceriç has argued, with Maturidism, diverging from them only when necessary in defensible fashion.

The demise of Sunni theology by the fifteenth century (CE) is a subject of considerable importance, yet the impact of this occurrence has received little attention. It forms the basis for the rest of the arguments set forth in this book. In this chapter, we concisely examined four key factors that contributed to theology’s decline, the most important for our interests being the anti-theological Athari movement. With

these points established, we can now begin our exploration of modern Islam and the new political challenges that emerged during the colonial period. The next segment of this analysis will lead us to the vital relationship between Athari imposed creedalism and the emergence of Islamism in the twentieth century. In so doing, we will take the life and writings of the late 'Umar al-Tilmisani, the former leader of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, as our primary subject.

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CHAPTER 3

Between Theology and Creed

In the seventh century (CE), the stark realities of Islam's role in the sociopolitical sphere necessitated, almost immediately, a range of theological debates. This, in turn, served as one of the chief catalysts for the development of *'ilm al-kalam* and its dominant Sunni schools, the Ash'arites and Maturidites. The new political experiments of the postcolonial Middle East, which abandoned centuries of imperial systems for a new political unit, the modern nation-state, initiated similar developments. However, this renewed twentieth-century political engagement, taking place in the absence of active theological discourse, has also meant that these developments have remained in their most fragile infancy and that many of the earliest theological debates in Islamic history, such as the question of *takfir* (accusation of apostasy), are being forced to play out once again in all their painful bloodiness, even as the solutions, or at least the necessary components, lie dormant in dusty forgotten tomes. Over the course of Islamic history, Atharis have seldom achieved significant political power, and even when they did their rule generally proved catastrophic. Successful and vibrant Muslim societies, we find, typically had recourse to theology, presiding over places where theologians of different varieties, whether Maturidite, Mu'tazilite, or Ash'arite, responded to the numerous dilemmas inherent in governing a complex and multifarious populace. During the tenure of 'Umar al-Tilmisani (d. 1986), the third Supreme Guide of the Society of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Society rejected violence

and radicalism at a time when modern Egypt was struggling with the disturbing violence and revolutionary tactics of radical Islamist factions, such as *al-Jihad*, that threatened the stability (even the existence) of the Egyptian state. The particular viewpoints, doctrines, and influences that informed al-Tilmisani's participatory pacifist strategies will now occupy our attention. Two works by al-Tilmisani, in particular, will be analyzed in this chapter—*Fi Riyad al-Tawhid* ("In the Garden of Monotheism") and *al-Hukumah al-Diniyyah* ("Religious Governance").

Defining Islamism

Thus far, I have made regular use of the term "Islamism" to denote modern political Sunnism, thereby rejecting the inclusion of Shi'ite political movements (e.g., revolutionary Iran) under the Islamist heading. The political Shi'ism of the Islamic Republic of Iran or Hezbollah is based on Khomeini's articulation of *velayat-e faqih*, or the guardianship of the jurist in the absence of the Hidden Imam (al-Mahdi), and thus is fundamentally different from Sunni Islamism. However, having now reached this pivotal stage in our analysis, even further revision of this contested and often ambiguous term is necessary. In general usage, Islamism is invoked by scholars and media pundits to denote virtually any contemporary anti-secular Islamic political activism of conservative disposition, whether Sunni or Shi'ite (or other). For instance, Gilles Kepel has persistently grouped various factions and thinkers ranging from the Taliban, Saudi Wahhabites, Hasan al-Banna, Sayyid Qutb, Ruhollah Khomeini, Hezbollah, and others, all under the expansive label of "Islamist." In another instance, favoring the term "fundamentalism" (often used interchangeably with Islamism), Emmanuel Sivan's inappropriately titled study *Radical Islam: Medieval Theology and Modern Politics* also condenses thinkers as disparate as Hasan al-Banna, Abu 'Alaa Mawdudi (who Sivan describes as a "theologian"), and Ruhollah Khomeini, all under one banner. Such strategies are certainly rhetorically convenient, especially when employed for a popular audience, but analytically they are useless and somewhat deplorable. Furthermore, if political activism and the implementation of *shari'ah* (i.e., a conservative interpretation thereof) are

the defining characteristics of Islamism (or so-called Islamic fundamentalism), as it seems to be conventionally used, then Islam from seventh-century (CE) Medina onward has always been Islamism. That is most certainly not the case.

Beginning in the early nineteenth century, Muslim societies across the globe were subjugated to foreign Christian powers for the first time in Islamic history, profoundly affecting Islamic political thought in the process.¹ For over twelve hundred years, Islamic polity was based on imperial systems, consisting of dynastic multiethnic states with varying degrees of localized autonomies and fluctuating contested borders dependent on military hegemony, that were at least nominally led by the agency of the caliph(s) or his viceroys. European colonialism, however, introduced the legacy of Westphalia (1648), Vienna (1815), and Versailles (1919) to its Muslim subjects and entrenched the dominant political unit of the modern age, the nation-state, across Africa, the Middle East, and Central and South Asia, carving out centralized, foreign-imposed, territorially defined states in the former territories and provinces of the great imperial lands of the past. Nationalism, with its notions of sovereignty and self-determination, was also generated by the colonial experience, and rival identities and cultural histories, whether as Egyptians, Turks, Algerians, and so on, were actively encouraged and intermittently brutally suppressed with the assistance of new nationalized political structures. Generally in awe of the dominance that Europe's sociopolitical and economic systems and ideologies had afforded the West, many in the Muslim world were eager to adopt or mimic European methods and to shun traditional systems and beliefs, leaving traditional customs to fade to the margins of society. A new, secular modern age had begun—or so many had thought.

A minority of Muslim thinkers, who equally admired or envied the advances and dominance of the West, saw an unacceptable emptiness in the materialism and “immorality” of its foreign systems and ideologies. These Muslim thinkers refused to relinquish their pride in the superiority and virtue of Islam, as well as their Islamic identities, by trying to align Islam with the new discoveries and advances of the modern age—ultimately to recover and repel the West. These thinkers, which included Jamal al-Din

al-Afghani (d. 1897) and Muhammad ‘Abduh (d. 1905), are commonly known to academics as “Muslim modernists,” but the early progressive liberalism of these modernists quickly gave way to the arch-conservatism of Athari thinkers who held even greater contempt for the ideas of the nonbelievers (as well as liberals). This shift was most pronounced in the person of Rashid Rida (d. 1935), once a close student of ‘Abduh, who increasingly moved to rigid Athari thought under Wahhabite influences in the early twentieth century. From Rida onward, the “Salafism” of al-Afghani and ‘Abduh became increasingly Athari-Wahhabite in nature, as it remains today. The Wahhabite tendency was not entirely pervasive, however. Neo-Sufism assumed the basis of a secondary Athari tendency that we find in the thought of Hasan al-Banna and the Muslim Brotherhood. As such, if the modern nation-state represents (among other things), as Crawford Young has written, the marriage of the state with the idea of nationalism, then (in my view) the emergence of Islamism in the first half of the twentieth century, whether in Egypt or in India, represents the marriage of Athari thought with the modern nation-state—a most formidable and potentially destructive marriage to be sure.²

The Westphalian system transformed territoriality into a rigid grid of demarcation, and through the imperial expansion of the colonial powers a global territorialization of the state, culminating in the early twentieth century, led to the universal imposition of defined boundaries on all land surfaces except the ice caps of the antipodes.³ Muslim societies were thus organized into fixed state boundaries with assigned nationalities far removed from realities on the ground and divided into “manageable” entities. These states (relative to their relationship to their colonial masters) then claimed a monopoly over coercive force within their defined territorial jurisdiction. Their powers were systematized (to varying degrees) and expressed through a single body of law and unified judicial system (with few checks and balances) that aspired to exert and maintain exclusive authority over civil society.⁴ Successful states must, at a most basic level, assure prosperity and protect civil society.⁵ As such, some states (e.g., Egypt) have proved far more successful than others (e.g., Iraq). But all states are inherently burdened with the task of making their societies “legible,” or, as James C. Scott has put it,

“to arrange [their populations] in ways that simplified the classic state functions.”⁶ This, Scott asserts, is the central problem of statecraft, and failure in this area has historically been endemic. Simply put, states create standard grids whereby highly complex, illegible, localized social customs and practices are to be recorded, monitored, and regulated, even by coercive force if necessary.⁷ European “high-modernist” ideologies, as Scott calls them, are an example of such efforts and in my view they deeply influenced the development of Islamist thought. European “high-modernism” assumes strong self-confidence “about scientific and technical progress, the explanation of production, the growing satisfaction of human needs, the mastery of nature (including human nature), and above all the rational design of social order commensurate with the scientific understanding of natural laws.”⁸ It is uncritical, unskeptical, and unscientifically optimistic about the possibilities for comprehensive planning of human settlement and production in statecraft, and, in authoritarian form, “is willing and able to use the full weight of [the state’s] coercive power to bring these high-modernist designs into being.”⁹

Like high-modernist ideologies, Islamism can be characterized by an uncritical and unquestioning self-confidence. But unlike high-modernism, Islamism places that confidence not in modern science and rationality, but in a divinely revealed, utopian system, transmitted and encapsulated in the words of the Qur’an and Hadith. Due to its divine origins, this system transcends human rationality and addresses every aspect of human life in perfect and virtuous fashion, despite a lack of empirical evidence and applicable content. Islamist rhetoric thus thrives on remaining theoretical and existing in abstraction. For when Islamism does achieve power and moves beyond the realm of theory and populist rhetoric, such as in the Sudan, it inevitably employs the coercive power of the modern nation-state to impose its hastily systematized, rigid, and detached designs on civil society (all the while professing the rhetorically powerful authority of God) in complete and utter disregard for the values, aspirations, and objections of its diverse and illegible human subjects whose reservations or protests are quickly nullified by dangerous charges of “sin” and “apostasy.” The strict textualism of Athari thought, which unapologetically champions the complete

self-sufficiency of the limited and often silent, inapplicable, and irrelevant content of the sacred texts for modern life and governance, must, when faced with the realities of power, stumble its way into hypocrisy (or risk irrelevance) and then ultimately make a choice between rational compromise or self-destruction, which (depending on the case) may take years or even decades. As we observed in chapter two, among the many Athari doctrines that inform this phenomenon, the Athari doctrine of the uncreated Qur'an, as opposed to the uncreated doctrine espoused by the Ash'arites, insists that the Arabic text itself, with all of its historical seventh-century (CE) Hijazi idiosyncrasies and situational responses, was preexistent and eternally binding on all societies and times despite the scarce resemblance of these societies to the time, culture, people, and events of the Prophet's life. Those troublesome illegible societies, which are essentially all societies across the world, must then be redesigned to conform to Islamist designs, which, given the impossibility of the task, will inevitably rely on the coercive power of the modern state and its claims of sovereignty and self-determination to achieve its goals. Scott further notes that:

The more static, standardized, and uniform a population or social space is, the more legible it is, and the more amenable it is to the techniques of state officials . . . many state activities aim at transforming the population, space, and nature under their jurisdiction into the closed systems that offer no surprises and that can best be observed and controlled.¹⁰

Despite idealistic and romantic notions of the monolithic unity of the *ummah* (the global Muslim community) by many Muslims, Sunni Islam, which lacks anything resembling the Vatican or ecumenical councils producing official creeds or canon, contains as much internal diversity as any religion in history. Sunnism, in essence, always has an open canon so long as principles and doctrines can be rigorously and credibly defended and justified on the basis of the Qur'an and the sunnah. We will also note the presence of the secular-minded, irreligious, lax, and so on, among all peoples in all societies. Moreover, the colonial powers carved out modern states (e.g., Iraq) by cutting through different autonomous ethno-geographical

regions (e.g., Kurdistan) and forcing together diverse assortments of religions, ethnicities, and languages into single political units. The states of the modern Middle East are anything but legible and they are hardly nations in the technical sense of the word. Indeed, the world continues to see the “success” of these colonial inventions today. In short, any attempt to impose the Athari designs of Islamist thought on such states will most certainly prove catastrophic—as they arguably would anywhere. Therefore, the application of Islam’s sacred texts to modern societies, most especially when combined with state power, must have recourse to theology as a platform for rational debate and discourse.

Neo-Sufism and Theological Compromise

In the eighteenth century, a revitalized, reformist strain of Sufism emerged that urged strict adherence to the parameters of “orthodox” Sunni Islam. This “Neo-Sufism,” as Fazlur Rahman and others have called it, was a major influence on the thought of Hasan al-Banna and the development of the Muslim Brotherhood.¹¹ Shah Wali Allah of Delhi (d. 1762), who spent time studying *ahadith* in Arabia, is a prominent example of this Neo-Sufi trend (his ideas also later reached Cairo). At a young age, Hasan al-Banna encountered Neo-Sufism in the small Egyptian village of Mahmudiyyah. His father, Shaykh Ahmad ‘Abdur-Rahman al-Banna, was a watch repairman (al-Sa’ati) by trade and a respected scholar of *ahadith* with many important contacts among Muslim scholars and associations. He is perhaps best known for his ambitious work classifying the traditions of Ahmed ibn Hanbal in a volume known as *Musnad al-Fath al-Rabbani*.¹² As a boy, Hasan was surrounded by religious learning and at the age of twelve he took an interest in the Hasafiyyah Sufi order. The founder of the order, Shaykh Hasnain al-Hasafi (d. 1910), was trained in religious sciences at al-Azhar in Cairo and was a master of the Shafi’i school of law. He died when al-Banna was only four years old. The Shaykh is reported to have been very pious, observant, brave, and he opposed any practices or beliefs that ran contrary to the Qur’an and the sunnah.¹³ Al-Banna recounts a number of stories about the Shaykh’s bravery in his memoirs, including an incident where the Shaykh boldly corrected the

King of Egypt on proper Islamic behavior.¹⁴ Shaykh al-Hasafi, we are told, also refused to drink coffee and advocated the seclusion of women. Al-Banna studied the writings of the Shaykh with great devotion and at the age of seventeen he had an encounter with the Shaykh in a dream. Al-Banna dreamt that Satan had appeared in the form of a giant, telling the Muslim masses that forbidden things were now permitted. When al-Banna stepped forward and declared the giant was a liar, the giant challenged him to a foot race. Al-Banna agreed and ran as fast as he could, but his short legs were no match for the giant's long strides. Then, just as he was about to be defeated, Shaykh al-Hasafi appeared, embraced him, held out his right hand toward the giant and declared: "Be gone you accursed spirit!" The giant then fled in terror and the Shaykh disappeared.¹⁵ Al-Banna returned to guide the people and then awoke from his dream. Soon thereafter, al-Banna sought out the founder's son Shaykh Syed 'Abdul-Wahhab al-Hasafi to make his oath of allegiance (*bay'a*) to the *Ikhwan al-Hasafiyyah*, which he did in Ramadan of 1923 becoming a full *murid* ("disciple") of the order.

In striking contrast to Wahhabite hostility toward Sufism, al-Banna, albeit firmly within the reformist Neo-Sufi camp, extolled praise on the mystics. "[If] the power of the knowledge of al-Azhar, the spiritual power of the mystics, and the practical power of the Islamic movements had worked united," he wrote, "it would have created an ideal *ummah* throughout the world."¹⁶ Sufis, going back to Hasan al-Basri (d. 728 CE), were credited by al-Banna as the greatest missionaries of Islam and a source of guidance when the leaders of the Muslim world had been corrupted by materialism and worldliness. However, over time, many Sufis, like the rest of the *ummah*, adopted innovations and deviated from the "true path." Al-Banna writes: "[Sufism] could not remain pure and it became a mixture of all sorts of innovation that were foreign to Islam; it gave unlimited opportunities to infidels, heretics, and innovators to preach distortions of Islam in the name of true Islam."¹⁷ The Hasafiyyah order, in keeping with the Neo-Sufi trend, claimed to be a restoration of the pious ascetic mysticism of the original Sufis. As a young disciple, al-Banna was fervent in his devotion and engaged in mystical practices that Wahhabites would have shunned and denounced. For instance, al-Banna and his fellow Hasafi disciples regularly visited

the tombs of saints (*‘awliya*) and offered their prayers there (but not to the saints it seems), practiced periodic vows of silence, participated in regular night vigils and *dhikr* (mystical chanting and invocations of God), and generally cut themselves off from the world with the exception of their schooling.¹⁸ Al-Banna did attribute some of his early behavior to the zeal of his youth and a lack of knowledge, but he never denounced it. His memoirs also tell us how he studied the works of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (see chapters one and two) and other treatises on mysticism, as well as several works of jurisprudence from all four Sunni *madhahib*. Many of these writings are officially banned in the Wahhabite kingdom of Saudi Arabia. This too departs from the Wahhabite tendency and defies any characterization of al-Banna as a rigid Hanbalite. He was surrounded by a rich and diverse culture of Islamic learning in Egypt, especially after he moved to Cairo, and his thinking arguably bears a far closer affinity to ‘Abduh than ‘Abdul-Wahhab and his Najdi puritanism. As the Muslim Brotherhood developed, al-Banna moved further away from his Sufi roots, but core elements remained throughout his life and the Society itself was modeled after a Sufi fraternal order, centered on the charismatic guidance of the *murshid* (“guide”) and his obedient disciples who declared their oath of allegiance to him. ‘Umar al-Tilmisani, one of the Society’s earliest and coveted recruits, carried on the Neo-Sufi tendencies of his master.

In chapter two, we examined the growth of Sufism as one of the four contributing factors that led to the demise of Sunni theology by the fifteenth century (CE). Hasan al-Banna even described the impact that al-Ghazali’s writings had on his own views on the proper limits of intellectual knowledge in his memoirs.¹⁹ Yet, al-Ghazali also remained an Ash‘arite, and Neo-Sufism too demonstrated an emphasis on interiority and contemplation that Wahhabism has been noticeably lacking since its inception. Neo-Sufism, unlike traditional forms of Sufism, showed considerable restraint, even a degree of distrust, toward experiential knowledge, and thus it rejected a host of mystical ideas and exercises (e.g., Ibn al-‘Arabi’s *wahdat al-wujud*). It prized adherence to the Qur’an and the sunnah, yet adopted the spirituality and contemplative inner piety of the early Sufis, such as Hasan al-Basri, who, incidentally, engaged in theological debate. This is not to say that

Neo-Sufism embraced *‘ilm al-kalam*, but it did more readily lend itself to introspective theological discourse than Wahhabism or any other modern Athari strains. We can observe this, for example, in the writings of the aforementioned Shah Wali Allah of Delhi. This point brings us back to the Islamist thought of ‘Umar al-Tilmisani and the presence of theological leanings in his writings on Islam and governance.

The Islamist Thought of ‘Umar al-Tilmisani

In his book *al-Hukumah al-Diniyyah* (“Religious Government”), published in 1985, al-Tilmisani addresses the idea of “religious government” and immediately dismisses the popularized slogan (*al-hukumah al-diniyyah*) as the imaginative construct of fear-mongering, secular-minded, and irreligious elements in Egyptian society, especially within the regime and the press. The inference of the slogan, as it was claimed by his critics, was that al-Tilmisani’s political program aspired to create a theocracy (i.e., rule by clerics claiming divine commission) in Egypt and invoked images of the tyrannical rule of the Pope and the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages. In this sense, al-Tilmisani retorts, theocracy does not exist in Islam. There is no priesthood in Sunni Islam as there is within Christianity or even Shi‘ite Islam. Al-Tilmisani states:

God Almighty has established equality in Islam between all people, men and women; equality among them in everything from a legal standpoint and [in terms of] religious obligations, and between the ruler and the ruled, [there exists] no superiority of the Shaykh al-Azhar, for example, over the doorman of the Azhar mosque; no difference exists between the President of the Republic and the watchman that stands at his door.²⁰

On this point, al-Tilmisani quotes a well-known *ayah* of the Qur’an that states: “Oh mankind! Verily We created you from one male and one female and We made you into nations and tribes to know one another, verily the most noble of you with God is the most pious [of you]” (49:13).²¹ The Prophet Muhammad himself, al-Tilmisani reminds us, told the first generation of Muslims: “Verily, I am a

human being like you.”²² The Prophet was the Messenger of God, the head of state (*ra'is al-dawlah*) and the chief judge, but he did not rule except by what God willed, al-Tilmisani argues. “He did not permit and did not forbid,” he writes, “except what came down to him by revelation from the Lord of the Worlds.”²³ A nonbeliever would, of course, disregard any such distinction between what al-Tilmisani sees as God’s Will versus what the Prophet willed. For a non-Muslim, everything that the Prophet passed off as God’s Will was merely his own. Yet, for al-Tilmisani, the distinction is essential, as no one, not even the Prophet, can rule by his own will and whims. To borrow an archetypal image from the Qur’an, there is no Pharaoh in Sunni Islam. No one speaks for God and no one represents God on Earth. God’s Will is known only through the Qur’an and authentic traditions (*ahadith*), and those in power must rule and judge by them to the best of their abilities assuming the continued support of the believers. This is an essential element to Sunnism, and, more importantly (for our interests), Islamism. There is no divinely ordained Imam as there is in Shi‘ism, nor is there anyone who represents a Hidden Imam as Khomeini and others have claimed. The rule of the jurist is not supreme, only the rule of God. “*Al-tawhid* [i.e., absolute monotheism] is the foundation of Islam,” he writes in *Fi Riyad al-Tawhid*, “and the difference between it and other religions.”²⁴

Even after the death of the Prophet, the Rightly Guide Caliphs (*al-Rashidun*) did not, al-Tilmisani contends, assign themselves positions of holiness (*qadasah*) like that of the Pope, nor did they enjoy the material luxuries of a monarch, or any privileges that their subjects did not enjoy (the historical record suggests otherwise).²⁵ In fact, the emphasis on the era of the “Rightly Guided” Caliphs as the definitive and exemplary model of post-prophetic Islamic government is a fixture of not only Islamism, but of Sunnism in general. The concept of the *Rashidun* has no basis in the Qur’an, but it does date to at least the time of Ahmed ibn Hanbal, who was one of the greatest defenders and promoters of the doctrine of the collective probity of the Prophet’s companions.²⁶ However, the very serious disparity that exists between the idealized image promoted by the doctrine of the *Rashidun* and the bleak historical reality of their political reigns is significant. Three of the four “Rightly Guided”

Caliphs were assassinated. The first of the four, Abu Bakr, spent his short reign crushing a large-scale rebellion. The third, 'Uthman, was widely challenged and accused of corruption and nepotism, and the fourth, 'Ali (the infallible first Imam of the Shi'ites), was never recognized by anything more than a faction of the Muslim community. He too spent his reign in perpetual warfare against Muslim rebels before being assassinated by a fellow believer in the Qur'an. This is hardly an exemplary political model to be emulated in any time, much less in the twenty-first century. The *Rashidun* of Islamist thought is little more than a mythic paradigm; the popular projection of a golden age when God's law reigned supreme and the Muslim community was in the ascent. Islamism, as already noted, thrives on existing in elusive theoretical abstraction. Reality is far too unsightly and troublesome. We must note too that it is not the office of the Caliphate (*Khalifah*) that al-Tilmisani or many Islamists emphasize. It is the seductive idea of a fair or egalitarian, just, and accountable government that judges and rules according to the *shari'ah*, as opposed to foreign-inspired (e.g., French) legal codes. The demand of the Muslim Brotherhood, he argues, is to bring the government in line with, or in conformity with, the *shari'ah* and that is all.²⁷ On this point, we should note, the Egyptian Constitution states that *shari'ah* is the principal source of legislation, although this article remains unmet. Al-Tilmisani strongly rejects any characterization of an Islamic government as authoritarian or opposed to freedom of thought, speech, and consultation. However, we must note that the *shari'ah* itself imposes limits on all of these things and thus contradicts this claim.

If the application of the *shari'ah* within the modern nation-state is the core component of al-Tilmisani's political program, then the form and details of its application are now our primary interest. In purely rhetorical form, the idea of "the *shari'ah*" can leave the impression that the *shari'ah* is a single, codified, legal tome. However, quite the opposite is true. The *shari'ah* is always the product of an interpretive agent. Its dictates and stipulations are formulated through the subjective agency of (we presume) trained individuals who in turn operate under the auspices of certain methodological and theological parameters. The latter is almost always overlooked, leaving legal scholars to maneuver within the

narrow confines of legal methodology or *fiqh*. Al-Tilmisani's family was probably from a Malikite background, but, as we will see in chapter four, his grandfather took great interest in the writings of Muhammad ibn 'Abdul-Wahhab, the founder of the Wahhabite sect in Arabia (now Saudi Arabia). 'Abdul-Wahhab was a proponent of *ijtihad* (independent judgment), as were the leading reformers of the Salafi movement in Egypt. Today many reform-minded individuals argue that a revival of *ijtihad* is the key to "modernizing" Islam and aligning it with modern democratic values. Proponents forget, however, that the ideas and brutal rigidity of the Wahhabites were formulated through *ijtihad* and produced what seems to be the very antithesis of a "modernized" Islam. Of course, there is no doubt that an interpretive agent can indeed pursue a progressive agenda through *ijtihad*, but all the tricks and legal maneuvering in the world cannot remedy the present dilemma so long as the theological postulates that the *shari'ah* rests upon remain static and forgotten. Nevertheless, al-Tilmisani's understanding of *ijtihad* does not appear to refer back to a strictly Athari textual methodology, but rather to the rich classical Sunni intellectual tradition. For instance, he states that the one engaged in *ijtihad* should have mastery in:

the science of semantics; the science of apparent and secret meanings; the science of commonalities; the general and the specifics; the free and the slave; the textual wordings and the literal meanings; the commanded and the forbidden; the abrogating verses and the abrogated; judgment with contradictory evidence; the misdeeds of the Arabs and the legislative connections to it and their social conditions; the occasions of revelation for the verses of the Qur'an; the reception of the Hadith; the content and chain of transmission of the Hadith; comprehension of the Arabic language; and the differences in Arabic dialects.²⁸

In other words, the task should be left to those trained in the proper religious sciences, but we must note that he is not limiting this function to the *ulama*. The Supreme Guide would never discredit his own judgments (he was a lawyer), those of his predecessor al-Hudaybi, or those of Hasan al-Banna. After all, there is no

priesthood in Sunni Islam. Al-Tilmisani asserts that the Islamic government is a system that coincides with the *shari'ah* of God and does not deviate from it in anything.²⁹ It does not have the capacity to ban or permit anything, a right that belongs to God alone, and it has no power, as the Vatican does (or did), over who will enter Paradise and who will enter Hellfire.³⁰ Only the record of one's deeds and misdeeds and the judgment of God will make that decision. Al-Tilmisani also writes, clearly in response to the conduct of the Egyptian regime, that it is not within the rights of the Islamic government to arrest or detain or torture or kill or confiscate property or take one's wealth according to political whims, but only within the firm limits revealed by God.³¹ The system of governance can thus remain relatively open and reflect the circumstances and needs of the age, so long as it sits in harmony with Islamic parameters. The revered caliph 'Umar ibn al-Khattab, al-Tilmisani tells us, even utilized some of the *dhimmi*s (protected People of the Book who paid the *jizya* or poll tax) to help run some of the affairs of the young empire, especially those with experience in administration from the newly conquered territories of the Byzantine Empire, such as Syria and Egypt.³² By 'Umar's time (r. 634–644 CE) the complexities and needs of the Muslims had moved far beyond what the Prophet himself had dealt with in his tenure as "head of state" in Arabia at Medina. The Islamic government al-Tilmisani envisioned, in contrast to Western liberal states, is also charged with the task of protecting society from rampant materialism and threats to public morality, while also defending the right to propagate the Word of God throughout the world.

As the reader should already be aware, if we are looking for an example of al-Tilmisani's theology, or the Muslim Brotherhood's theology, we will not find it. Rather, at the basis of al-Tilmisani's understanding of Islamic government is *'aqidah al-tawhid*, or the "creed of pure monotheism." Normative modern characterizations of Christianity and Judaism, or even Zoroastrianism, as "monotheistic" might be a disservice to the reader at this point. They are not monotheistic in the Islamic sense of *tawhid*, although Orthodox Judaism comes very close. For, in Islamic thought, if God is absolutely One and there is no power in existence except God, no source but God, and no rival to God in anything, then

creation itself is like a wheel spinning on a single and unchallenged divine axis. As such, in al-Tilmisani's reflections on the subject, if God has issued a decree on a certain matter, regarding the question of alcohol or on charging interest for a loan, for example, there is no power in the universe to overturn or dispute that decree except God. Furthermore, in Islam, revelation to humanity has ceased with the Prophet Muhammad. For a ruler to legally permit Muslims to consume and trade in alcohol is not only a sin, but *shirk* ("idolatry"), the most grave sin in Sunni Islam. The Qur'an, furthermore, warns humanity repeatedly about what has happened to civilizations and societies where human beings willfully ignore God's Message or violate God's Law in favor of their own opinions. They are humbled and destroyed, just as Pharaoh or the people of Lot were in time immemorial. Some Egyptians, as we will see in chapter four, saw this lesson in Egypt's loss to Israel in the 1967 Six-Day War. Yet, al-Tilmisani's understanding of the creed of monotheism is not simply one of fear-mongering or threats of divine retribution. It is deeply tied to a host of existential themes as well. Al-Tilmisani's writings on *tawhid*, namely in his aforementioned book *Fi Riyad al-Tawhid*, are one part Egyptian Salafi and another part Neo-Sufi. To live or walk (metaphorically speaking) in the "garden of monotheism," he tells us, is to be in constant contact with God and to possess a consciousness of God in everyday life, even in the most mundane affairs.³³ To know *al-tawhid* is to live a life of happiness and certitude without fear, no matter the trials that face you, because God alone determines the outcome of all things and God's promise is true and just. God's love and mercy for His servants, al-Tilmisani reminds his readers, is greater than a mother's love for her child. There is no cruel wind of fate, and even the worst suffering will be redeemed for the righteous believers in the world to come. The life of this world is just a short struggle (*jihad*) that must be endured with patience, courage, and obedience to God, through which the righteous will emerge having earned the mercy and reward of God everlasting. A society that goes astray from the Law of God not only disobeys Him, but also endangers its citizens by making them vulnerable to the snares of this world, leading weak and fallible human beings astray and ultimately into self-destruction both in this life and in the next (e.g., Hellfire).

Creedal Ash'arism and the Shaykhs of the Muslim Brotherhood

By the time of al-Tilmisani's tenure as Supreme Guide, the Society included two of the most popular and influential Azhar shaykhs in Egypt among its ranks, Muhammad al-Ghazali (d. 1996) and Yusuf al-Qaradawi. The recruitment of members of the *ulama* into the Islamist ranks was still rare at this point in time. Both scholars joined the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1940s as young men, endured the crackdown of 1949, and the assassination of Hasan al-Banna, but their acclaim as leading Islamic scholars was still to come. Shaykh al-Ghazali graduated from al-Azhar in 1941, while Shaykh Qaradawi completed his studies at al-Azhar much later in 1973 after a series of arrests during Nasser's crackdown on Islamists. Al-Ghazali was officially expelled from the Muslim Brotherhood in 1954 for his involvement in the factional opposition to the leadership of the second Supreme Guide, Hasan al-Hudaybi (d. 1973). However, he realigned himself more closely with the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1970s when al-Tilmisani assumed leadership of the Society. Qaradawi has continually maintained his affiliation with the Muslim Brotherhood. However, he has allegedly turned down leadership positions in the movement several times and has now resided in Qatar as a professor at the University of Qatar for decades. By the time of al-Tilmisani's selection as Supreme Guide, the two young scholars were growing in popularity and prestige, and today al-Ghazali and al-Qaradawi, who first met each other while in prison (for being Muslim Brothers), are two of the foremost Sunni scholars of the last century. More importantly, the religious views of al-Ghazali and al-Qaradawi share a number of striking parallels with the writings and pronouncements of 'Umar al-Tilmisani. It is difficult to know whether the two Shaykhs were responsible for influencing the Supreme Guide, or vice versa, or at all. However, it should be noted that al-Tilmisani's ideas do appear as early (often earlier) as those of al-Ghazali and al-Qaradawi, at least insofar as they entered into public discourse in the form of books, treatises, and pronouncements. But what is perhaps most interesting is that both al-Ghazali and al-Qaradawi professed to be adherents of Ash'arism in their *'aqidah*, as well as advocates of Neo-Sufism.

Shaykh Muhammad al-Ghazali, a hugely popular fixture in Egypt throughout his life (despite holding several posts abroad in the 1980s), produced a number of widely read, but often controversial, books in the 1990s, many years after al-Tilmisani's death. In 1989, al-Ghazali won the prestigious King Faisal International Prize in Islamic Studies from Saudi Arabia. However, his books and pronouncements soon earned him the condemnation of Saudi Arabia's Athari-Wahhabites for his generally progressive viewpoints (e.g., on women) and harsh criticism of Athari textualism. In the area of politics, al-Ghazali, like al-Tilmisani, rejected the idea that Islamic government was a "theocracy" (i.e., rule by priests). There is no such thing as "men of religion" with a sanctified claim to rule, he argued, and the *ulama*, like himself, "are just a group of Muslims, neither above nor below any other group," and, furthermore, there is no precedent from the "golden age" of Islam when the great scholars claimed rule for themselves.³⁴ "[Islam] recognizes no need for priests," al-Ghazali writes in *Our Beginning in Wisdom*, "nor can there be any such thing as 'Islamic priesthood.'"³⁵ Islamic government is, in fact, a civil government that depends on the consent and support of the people, and the divine character of the Qur'an and the sunnah must never be extended to any political regime that is very much human.³⁶ Every generation of people should formulate their own political system and structure in accordance with their own needs and times. This system should conform to the values and principles of the Qur'an and the sunnah, seeking to establish a state of justice above all else. At the foundation of any Islamic government is the *shari'ah*, but al-Ghazali, as al-Tilmisani did, linked his vision of *shari'ah* to the broader Islamic civilizational heritage and not simply to the Medinan paradigm.³⁷ These applications, he admits, were often flawed. However, they also produced a grand and dynamic civilization that was at the forefront of the world for many centuries. He also argues that the authority of the Qur'an in these matters reigns above all else, especially over the Hadith. Any *ahadith* that contradict the Qur'an (even in principle), including those that have a sound *isnad* and multiple transmitters, are to be rejected. "I am fed up with those who hardly have any knowledge at all of Qur'anic provisions," he states in his book *The Prophet's Sunnah between the Ahl al-Hadith and the Ahl al-Fiqh*,

“and yet issue judgments based only on the sunnah [i.e., citing *ahadith*, especially questionable or isolated ones].”³⁸ The Hadith, the basis through which Muslims determine the sunnah, must always be understood both in reference to the Qur’an and in the light of reason that allows the conditions of the contemporary world to be addressed.³⁹ “Islamic government is not against reason,” al-Ghazali argues elsewhere, “because such a government will perform its duties according to the Holy Qur’an and to reason.”⁴⁰ It is abundantly clear then that al-Ghazali did not subscribe to the Athari dogma of *bila kayf*.

Another dimension of al-Ghazali’s emphasis on *shari‘ah* echoes the ideas of Hasan al-Banna and the anticolonial roots of the Muslim Brotherhood. Al-Ghazali argued that Egyptians will only find prosperity in the modern world by renewing their connection to Islam and ridding themselves of “educational, legislative, and intellectual colonialism.”⁴¹ He contended that the trauma of European imperialism and colonialism destroyed and warped their sense of identity, and created a struggling and instable society. The separation of Islam from the state, he declared, “is only cultural imperialism and the domination of Christian powers that has separated them in our minds.”⁴² Islam is faith as well as acts, as well as a system.⁴³ If Islam is dispossessed of state power, “the greater part of its teaching remains as mere ink on paper, because its observance is impossible through the efforts of individuals alone.”⁴⁴ He continues:

In Islam, there are personal duties of worship which individuals can perform directly and through their own personal effort alone. Such [as] prayer, fasting, and other affiliated duties. But there are, in addition to these, social duties which individuals cannot discharge alone and which require the instrumentality of the state... The purpose of state rule is not only administration of justice and the maintenance of public services; it also includes certain religious duties that cannot be separated from the state machinery and routine.⁴⁵

The state is therefore essential to the practice of Islam. The government of the state should ideally take the form of a constitutional

democracy. He even argues that elements of Western systems, such as the separation of powers, multiple parties with competitive elections, constitutional guarantees of basic political freedoms, such as freedom of speech and assembly, an independent judiciary, and limited terms of office, should be emulated freely.⁴⁶ Al-Ghazali, like al-Tilmisani, also rejected the practice of *takfir* and rebellion against the government. In this, both figures were following the position of Abu'l Hasan al-Ash'ari (see chapter one) who stated: "It is our opinion that we ought not to declare a single one of the people of the *qiblah* [i.e., Muslims] an infidel for a sin of which he is guilty, such as fornication or theft or the drinking of wine, as the [Kharijites] hold, thinking that such people are infidels."⁴⁷ On the subject of rebellion or political revolutions, al-Ash'ari also stated: "It is an error on anybody's part to approve going out against [the rulers] when they have clearly abandoned rectitude; and we believe in abstinence from going out against them with the sword, and abstinence from fighting in civil wars."⁴⁸

Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi is arguably the most popular and influential *'alim* in the Arab world today and his influence extends far beyond it. Like Muhammad al-Ghazali, who al-Qaradawi called "his teacher," he is known for his moderate positions and condemnation of Athari extremism, including the practice of *takfir*. "Had He so desired, [God] could have given all religion the same formulation, unquestionable and needing no *ijtihad*, so that those who disobey would immediately make themselves unbelievers," al-Qaradawi once argued, "[but God did not do so] in order that the nature of religion would be consistent with the nature of language and of humanity in order to make things easier for those who believe."⁴⁹ When al-Ghazali died in 1996, al-Qaradawi spoke in reverence and defense of his teacher, colleague, and friend at a conference in Amman, Jordan, on June 20. He stated:

I assert that I am a student of [Shaykh al-Ghazali]... Al-Azhar, like most religious schools and universities, follows the Ash'arite school of *'aqidah*. I know that our Salafi [i.e., Athari] brethren do not like this, but I would like to say that the whole Muslim *ummah* follows the Ash'arite school [in *'aqidah*]. So, has the whole *ummah* gone astray?... So, Shaykh al-Ghazali was an Ash'arite. He was

just not fanatical about it. He studied the Ash‘arite school during his primary, secondary, and college years. His book, *The ‘Aqidah of a Muslim*, was written with a Salafi spirit and an Ash‘arite breath. One can notice the Ash‘arite touch in the way he defined and organized chapters of the book. Nobody would be able to avoid this Ash‘arite touch. Moreover, he took the opinion of applying both logic and proofs in *‘aqidah*. . . [Shaykh] al-Ghazali, and Ash‘arites before him, said that logic is the foundation of proofs. . . Our Shaykh al-Ghazali used logic to understand *shari‘ah* and *‘aqidah*. He thus refused to accept those few *ahadith* that go against reason.⁵⁰

Now if al-Ghazali’s and al-Qaradawi’s Islamist views are representative of *creedal* Ash‘arism, as opposed to active *theological* Ash‘arism (which is virtually extinct), and many of these views parallel those of ‘Umar al-Tilmisani and arguably indicate an adherence to the *‘aqidah* of Ash‘arism by the Supreme Guide as well, how do these creedal Ash‘arite “Islamists” compare to those Islamists who rejected Ash‘arism and theology along with it?

Ayman Al-Zawahiri and Athari Radicalism

There are few figures more closely associated with radical Islamism than the Egyptian physician Ayman al-Zawahiri (b. 1951). As a student at Cairo University, Ayman al-Zawahiri was one of the young zealous students who rejected al-Tilmisani’s overtures toward the Islamist student associations during the 1970s. Indeed, he was one of the most radical figures on campus and an outspoken critic of the Muslim Brotherhood who joined the first manifestation of Egypt’s militant *al-Jihad* group when he was only a teenager. Al-Zawahiri was born into one of Egypt’s most well-respected aristocratic families and grew up in the upper-class Cairo suburb of Madi (ironically a favorite of American expatriates today), although his family originally emigrated in 1860 from what is now Saudi Arabia.⁵¹ His granduncle ‘Abdul-Razzaq ‘Azzam was the first secretary general of the Arab League.⁵²

Once an introverted, religious young man and passionate “believer” in Gamal ‘Abdel-Nasser, al-Zawahiri increasingly turned to Islamism

in response to the persecution of the Muslim Brothers, and, like many, after the humiliating defeat of the Six-Day War.⁵³ As al-Zawahiri stated:

The 1967 defeat shook the earth under this idol [i.e., Gamal 'Abdel-Nasser and Nasserism] until it fell on its face, causing a severe shock to its disciples, and frightening its subjects. The *jihadi* movements grew stronger and stronger as they realized that their avowed enemy was little more than a statue to be worshipped, constructed through propaganda, and through the oppression of unarmed innocents. The direct influence of the 1967 defeat was that a large number of people, especially youths, returned to their original identity: that of members of an Islamic civilization.⁵⁴

The writings and execution ("martyrdom") of Sayyid Qutb in 1966 in particular were a major influence on al-Zawahiri's subsequent ideology. During an interrogation following the assassination of Sadat in October of 1981, he stated: "[An Islamic government is one] that rules according to the *shari'ah* of God Almighty... *jihad* means removing the current government through resisting it and changing the current regime to establish an Islamic government... through a military coup."⁵⁵ Al-Zawahiri's position aligns with the radical positions taken by Qutb in his massive and popular exegesis *Fi Zilal al-Qur'an* ("In the Shade of the Qur'an"), and in his manifesto *Ma'alim fi'l-Tariq* ("Milestones"), the latter containing portions of the former. His statement also contradicts the teachings of Ash'arism, which rejects both *takfir* and rebellion against sinful or nominal Muslim rulers. Even though al-Zawahiri has stated in the past that he does not pronounce people infidels on the basis of their sins (i.e., *takfir*) as the radical Egyptian *Takfir wa'l-Hijrah* group had done, his claim has no support in reality.⁵⁶

Al-Zawahiri claims that his worldview is based on three principal sources: the Qur'an, the Hadith, and the works of the respected scholars, identifying by name the aforementioned Athari scholar Ahmed ibn Taymiyyah. He further states:

[The radical Islamist movement] has succeeded in outlining to the youths issues that were absent from the minds of the Muslim

masses, such as the supremacy of the *shari'ah*, the apostasy of the rulers who do not rule according to God's words, and the necessity of going against rulers who are affiliated with the enemies of Islam.⁵⁷

The absolutist *takfiri* nature of such statements is clear. In the 1980s, al-Zawahiri fled from Egypt and traveled to Pakistan and Afghanistan to join the Afghan *mujahidin* ("holy warriors") fighting the Soviets. It was there that he met the Athari-Wahhabite militant Osama bin Laden, and according to other radicals who knew him, he became increasingly extreme and uncompromising in his positions during this period.⁵⁸ Already an outspoken critic of the Muslim Brotherhood, al-Zawahiri turned against even radical Islamist movements such as the *Gama'at al-Islamiyyah*.⁵⁹ If even his fellow Egyptian Islamist radicals could not live up to al-Zawahiri's standards of proper Islamic piety, how can a nation-state based on his ideology ever govern over a complex and illegible mass populace? This is of course where coercive force, justified by charges of "apostasy" (forfeiting life and property) and insulated claims of the divine origins to his flawed political designs come into play.

Conclusion

Despite its obvious transcendent interests, Sunni theology has always grappled with the sobering realities and pragmatic concerns of human societies, most especially in the realm of governance. Yet, Islamism's marriage of the modern nation-state with Athari imposed creedalism emerged in the absence of theology. The inherent problems and challenges of statecraft are thus amplified exponentially by the infusion of a creed and design for civil society that staunchly resists rational interrogation and persistently exhibits a violent intolerance for dissenting opinion or the natural illegibility of human subjects. Over the decades, however, Islamism has shown it is not at all monolithic. The moderate positions and participatory pacifism of the late 'Umar al-Tilmisani and the Muslim Brotherhood, as opposed to the radicalism of Ayman al-Zawahiri and the *Jihad* movement, suggest the existence of profound ideological differences among Islamists. At the core, we see a theological disposition in the

thought of al-Tilmisani that is clearly Ash‘arite in nature and that points to a distinct correlation between not only political moderation and theology, but perhaps Neo-Sufism and theological introspection. The theological dimension of al-Tilmisani’s thought is, however, still strictly creedal in form, reflecting established Sunni doctrine rather than renewed or active theological discourse. Although a contributing factor to the progressive and moderate positions of al-Tilmisani, even a creed produced by theology (as opposed to anti-theological Athari textualism) is undoubtedly ill-equipped to deal with the challenges faced by modern nation-states. While affirming the considerable significance of creedal or theological positions to our understanding of modern Islam, we must also acknowledge that this is only one of many factors in the complex picture of an Islamist thinker such as al-Tilmisani or Islamism as a whole. As such, we must turn to the events of his turbulent life in twentieth-century Egypt to understand his views within their own unique historical context.

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CHAPTER 4

The Guide through the Storm

At 3:30 a.m. on May 22, 1986 (Ramadan 14, 1406 AH), ‘Umar al-Tilmisani, the third Supreme Guide (*al-Murshid al-‘Amm*) of the Muslim Brotherhood, died at the age of eighty-one.¹ The following day, almost a million Egyptians mourned him with a massive gathering around *Midan al-Tahrir* (Cairo’s main square) that attracted Egyptian government officials, including Prime Minister ‘Ali Lutfi (representing President Hosni Mubarak), the Shaykh al-Azhar ‘Ali Gad al-Haqq (d. 1996), and delegations from all of Egypt’s major political parties.² According to Muslim Brotherhood estimates, fifteen thousand cars took part in the funeral procession through the streets of Cairo to the cemetery in Nasre.³ This marked the first time in the history of the Muslim Brotherhood that the Egyptian people were allowed to publicly mourn the death of a Supreme Guide by their government.⁴ As one journalist wrote: “It was as though the Brotherhood and their many sympathizers, who had been denied two previous public funerals [i.e., Hasan al-Banna and Hasan al-Hudaybi], were making up in one go for all the past grief the movement had suffered.”⁵ The events of May 23, 1986, were, in this respect, remarkable. Al-Tilmisani was the leader of an organization that had been outlawed by the Egyptian government for over thirty years. It was subjected to numerous campaigns of suppression, mass arrests, torture, and executions. He himself spent over seventeen years of his life in Egypt’s prisons, and yet his public funeral attracted hundreds of thousands, including Egyptian government officials. How could

this be? As we will see, ‘Umar al-Tilmisani is a figure of significant importance. He rejected the way of violence, steered the Muslim Brotherhood away from revolutionary radicalism, and endured the brutal persecution of the regime while staunchly adhering to the non-violent pursuit of democratic reforms. Some have dismissively alleged that al-Tilmisani was simply an old man, tempered by age and fear of further torture rather than by any intellectual or religious substance, or that he was merely interested in power and thus compromised his “real” convictions. I contend that these dismissive accusations are without merit and overlook the significance of both al-Tilmisani’s character and his Islamist thought.

In popular Western discourse, the very mention of the Muslim Brotherhood seems to elicit uneasiness, hostility, or conjure up sensational images of terrorism or Taliban-like brutality. Such impressions are largely the imaginative products of the ever-popular, monolithic, and media-fed conception of the dark and monstrous entity known to us only vaguely as “Islamic fundamentalism.” The life of ‘Umar al-Tilmisani, however, reveals a far more complex picture and provides us with an important glimpse into the diversity of Islamism. For much of the first half of the twentieth century, the Muslim Brotherhood was largely synonymous with Islamism, although other groups did indeed exist both in Egypt and abroad (e.g., India). But the second half of the twentieth century was much different. In the 1960s and 1970s there was an explosion of Islamist groups, with violent, radical Islamist strains emerging on the periphery of the Muslim Brotherhood and splintering off into a range of separate factions. It is true that the Muslim Brotherhood established an underground anti-British militia (*al-Nizam al-Khass* or “The Special Order”) in the 1940s. However, armed militias were maintained by nearly every Egyptian political faction during this period, including secular-nationalists, socialists, and communists. Members of the Muslim Brotherhood’s militia also fought alongside Arab government forces in the 1948 Arab-Israeli War under the authority of the Arab League, and individual incidents of violence,⁶ as well as a rebellion against the Muslim Brotherhood’s leadership, occurred when those fighters returned home after the Arab defeat. As such, any characterization of the Muslim Brothers of this era as somehow uniquely violent (i.e., in contrast to other parties of the

colonial period), or as a “terrorist” organization, are largely unwarranted and generally polemical in nature. Such labels are however appropriate for the rival peripheral factions that emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s. The radical, or “jihadist,” Islamist factions took inspiration from a range of materials, including the writings of Sayyid Qutb, a prolific writer who has been the subject of countless studies.⁷ The revolutionary, anticolonial zeal of the period that once brought the Free Officers to power in a military coup in July of 1952, continued to foment and linger among those still dissatisfied with the direction of the country, whether economically or due to its rapid modernization campaigns and departure from traditional Islamic norms and culture. Groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, which defended and rallied around the preservation of the essential “Islamic” character of Egyptian society and the importance of Islamic tenets and laws to the public order (as well as communal salvation), were actively suppressed and brutalized by Gamal ‘Abdel-Nasser’s autocratic socialist regime. Close attention to the life and writings of Sayyid Qutb, in fact, reveals a vivid correlation between the radicalization of his Islamist thought and the deterioration of his relationship with Nasser and the Free Officers beginning in 1954 and then onward through his nearly twelve years of imprisonment and torture, until his eventual execution in 1966.⁸ Nasser and the Free Officers (including future president Anwar Sadat) eagerly used the Muslim Brotherhood to help assure the success of their military coup, luring the Muslim Brothers with promises of reform, power, and influence, even establishing close ties with the then-moderate Sayyid Qutb (who had only just joined the Muslim Brotherhood), before laying siege to the Society in less than two years. Al-Tilmisani, as noted earlier, was among those thousands of Muslim Brothers imprisoned in the crackdown and subjected to internment and torture in Nasser’s prison camps. Then in 1967, the devastating defeat of the Arab states to the Israelis in the Six-Day War sent shockwaves throughout the region and infinitely inflamed existing tensions, seriously damaging Nasser’s credibility and the promises of socialist, Pan-Arabist, and secular-nationalist ideologies along with it. In its wake, the “Islamic revival” (i.e., Islamism) garnered renewed and increasing interest, especially among the disenfranchised masses.

After Nasser's death in 1970 (from natural causes) and Sadat's rise to power, the radical Islamist periphery grew and organized into a range of both public and secretive associations. Amidst widespread agitation for the Arab-Israeli war of October 1973, *al-Gama'at al-Islamiyyah* ("The Islamic Group") was established by loosely organized students on various Egyptian university campuses increasingly infused with frustration and discontent.⁹ A population explosion occurred in the Arab world from 1955 to 1970, and by the 1970s Egypt was overwhelmed by literate young urbanites seeking upward social mobility, only to find a weak and stagnant Egyptian economy and social structure fraught with nepotism and elitism.¹⁰ Among the founding members of the *Gama'at* was a young medical student at the University of Cairo, named 'Abdel-Moneim Abul-Futuh (b. 1951). During his primary school years, Abul-Futuh and his classmates, like all good patriotic Egyptians, regarded themselves as "Gamal 'Abdel-Nasser's sons" and as "believers" in Nasser.¹¹ But their belief, like so many others, was shaken by the humiliating defeat of the Six-Day War, and turning to religion, he would later say, was a natural response for Egyptians shocked by the defeat.¹² Saudi Arabia, which established the Muslim World League in 1962 to propagate their Athari-Wahhabite brand of Islam around the world, was there to meet their needs, benefiting from the enormous wealth that their massive oil reserves increasingly afforded them. Saudi Arabia had long opposed Nasser's Pan-Arab socialist project (i.e., "Nasserism"), especially his practice of co-opting Islam as an instrument of the state to propagate public subservience and socialist values. His autocratic rule had even dared to nationalize the venerable al-Azhar in 1961, reducing the already reeling Sunni *ulama* to the status of civil servants, and leaving a considerable disturbance (even void) of Islamic authority in the country.¹³ Amidst this atmosphere, Abul-Futuh's small movement grew rapidly and the *Gama'at* swept to landslide victories in the Students' Union elections of 1972, defeating the once dominant campus Leftists to the satisfaction of Sadat.¹⁴ From 1971 to 1975, Sadat had grown hostile to the Soviets and other Leftist factions in Egypt and gradually released the Muslim Brothers from their prisons, granting them greater (albeit temporary) freedoms.

By 1975, senior members of the Muslim Brotherhood, led by the new Supreme Guide ‘Umar al-Tilmisani, took serious notice of the *Gama’at*, and established contact with Abul-Futuh and the radical student leadership.¹⁵ The students posed a range of concerns for the more moderate Muslim Brothers. They were young, inexperienced, and a potential source of disunity, whose militancy might provoke the wrath of the government against all Islamists, including the Muslim Brotherhood.¹⁶ As Abul-Futuh would later state, the Muslim Brotherhood’s outreach sparked considerable tension and debate among the *Gama’at*: “Salafist and Jihadist tendencies colored the way we viewed the Brotherhood. Viewed through our revolutionary lens, the Brotherhood did not seem at the time to be close to our vision.”¹⁷ But by 1976, Abul-Futuh and many others were indeed “converted” to the ranks of the Muslim Brotherhood. But a faction of the most radical students refused, including a young medical student and colleague of Abul-Futuh named Ayman al-Zawahiri. Those opposed to the Muslim Brotherhood continued on as a separate Islamist association under the name *al-Gama’at al-Islamiyyah*. As Abul-Futuh would later note, the teachings of the Supreme Guide al-Tilmisani played a decisive role in his decision to part ways with the radicals:

Joining the Brotherhood was a turning point for me. It was a huge eye opener to what we term *al-Islam al-Wasati* [“Centrist Islam”]. During the 1970s, we were exposed only to Salafi ideas, books would come in tons and for free from Saudi Arabia all the time. And Brotherhood literature was banned. It was people like the late ‘Umar al-Tilmisani, then the Supreme Guide, that made me realize that Islam was about a plethora of ideas and opinions and it was encountering such plurality within Islam that radically altered my views... Perhaps, had we not joined the Brotherhood, my generation would have turned into Ayman al-Zawahiris and Bin Ladens. The wing of the *Gama’at* which took up arms against the state was precisely the group that did not join the ranks of the Brotherhood.¹⁸

Abul-Futuh’s narrative is not unique. It echoes similar stories shared by other Egyptian Islamists of his generation.¹⁹ Meanwhile, as the

Gama'at continued as a more radical Islamist faction and became notorious for acts of violence, other radical Islamist strains emerged on the periphery as well. These other factions also rebuked the participatory pacifism of al-Tilmisani and the Muslim Brotherhood and championed the ideas of the late Sayyid Qutb, ideas that the Muslim Brothers both denounced and distanced themselves from, beginning with al-Tilmisani's predecessor, the second Supreme Guide, Hasan al-Hudaybi (d. 1973).

In 1977, one these "Qutbian" factions, known as *al-Takfir wa'l-Hijrah* ("Excommunication and Migration"), kidnapped and executed a government minister and prominent Azhar 'alim Shaykh Husayn al-Dhahabi, who had denounced the group by labeling them as Kharijites.²⁰ *Al-Takfir* had emerged in Nasser's prison camps among Islamist student activists arrested in the police raids of 1965.²¹ By 1977, the faction was led by a young agricultural engineer with no religious training named Shukri Mustafah, who held (like Qutb) that the entire Muslim world had reverted to a state of *jahiliyyah* (pre-Islamic barbarism), and that the "true" Muslims (i.e., *Takfir* members) should flee from society and wage war (without limits) to establish true Islam, just as the Prophet had once fled to Medina (Yathrib) in order to defeat pagan Mecca.²² *Takfir* members, who generally came from the lowest socioeconomic levels, cut themselves off from Egyptian society, even annulling marriages to "infidels" and arranging others, living in communal quarters (sometimes caves), and working as small traders.²³ After the Dhahabi incident, the government cracked down on the once dismissed group and Mustafah and several others were captured and executed. Over four hundred others were arrested. The incident initiated a general backlash from Sadat's regime against all Islamists in the country, including al-Tilmisani and the Muslim Brothers, who had no connections to *Takfir* and repudiated both their ideology and methods. After 1977, radical Islamist activities on university campuses, once permitted (even encouraged) by Sadat, were shut down and moved (largely clandestinely) to the poverty stricken regions surrounding Egypt's main cities.²⁴

Those radicals that managed to elude the crackdown (and garner new recruits) regrouped under the shadowy name of *al-Jihad*, and were led by a young electrical engineer named Muhammad 'Abdel-Salam Faraj.²⁵ In his self-published manifesto, entitled *al-Faridah*

al-Gha'ibah ("The Neglected Duty"), Faraj extolled the preeminence of *jihad* (described exclusively as sacred warfare) as a perpetual duty required of all true Muslims against any state or ruler that fails to enforce God's Law, even if they profess to be Muslims (e.g., Sadat). In so doing, Faraj relied heavily on the writings of Ahmed ibn Taymiyyah, giving special attention to his works dealing with the illegitimacy of the Mongol rulers of the fourteenth century (CE) who nominally professed Islam but ruled by their own customary laws, known as the *Yasa*. Faraj also made frequent references to the Athari works of Ibn Taymiyyah's student Ibn Kathir, and made extensive and selective use of passages from the Qur'an and *ahadith*, the latter being especially abundant in the text. Numerous other scholars, including Ibn Qudama, Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, and Ahmed ibn Hanbal, are also included, nearly all of them being masters of Hadith, including al-Nawawi, who appears to be the only Ash'arite (although not a theologian) included in the *Faridah*. Abu Hanifah is mentioned briefly, as is his student Abu Yusuf, but Faraj's interest in the two eighth century (CE) scholars is restricted to a smattering of their legal rulings. Briefly put, *al-Faridah al-Gha'ibah* is a fundamentally Athari treatise on warfare and apostasy uniquely colored by the virulent revolutionary fervor engendered among young disenfranchised Islamists amidst the struggle against the brutal autocracy of the modern Egyptian state. Faraj's treatise is a militant celebration of unrelenting bloodshed as the central tenet of the divine plan, articulated in a dogmatic worldview of binary simplicity where "morality" and the "divine command" can be quoted at leisure without any troublesome interference from reason, intellect, or compassion. As Faraj states:

Ibn Taymiyyah says: "Any group of people that rebels against any single prescript of the clear and reliably transmitted pre-scripts of Islam has to be fought . . . even if the members of this group pronounces the Islamic confession of faith." . . . There is no doubt that the first battlefield for *jihad* is the extermination of these infidel leaders and to replace them by a complete Islamic order. From here we should start.²⁶

Throughout the text, Faraj articulates a radical reformulation and rejection of traditional Sunni principles of governance and proper

warfare, tenuously refuting, often with no more evidence than a smattering of Hadith, nearly all of the basic principles established over centuries of Sunni legal and theological discourse. The reader will find an example (among many others) of traditional Sunni formulations on these matters articulated in Abul-Hasan al-Mawardi's (d. 1058 CE) classic text *al-Ahkam al-Sultaniyya w'al-Wilayat al-Diniyyah*.²⁷

While Sadat led the country into war with Israel in 1973 and achieved some initial gains, he also worked vigorously for a negotiated settlement after the conflict, culminating with his historic trip to Jerusalem and the signing of the Egyptian-Israeli peace accord in 1979.²⁸ But his policy was met with widespread opposition at home across the ideological and political spectrum, including al-Tilmisani and the Muslim Brotherhood. Al-Tilmisani, in particular, stressed that it was a sin to leave any Muslim land in the hands of a non-Muslim occupier.²⁹ The chorus of opposition from all sides led Sadat to respond by making opposition to the peace initiative a criminal offence, banning all critics from civic and political life, and ultimately authorizing mass arrests in September of 1981 ("The Autumn of Fury"), which landed al-Tilmisani and some sixteen hundred other critics of Sadat in prison. Sadat, now increasingly isolated, even accused al-Tilmisani and the Muslim Brotherhood of trying to overthrow his regime.³⁰ Meanwhile, the radical factions, like Faraj's *al-Jihad*, who remained secretive and underground, took the treaty with Israel as only further damning proof that Sadat ("Pharaoh") was a traitor and an apostate to be eliminated and overthrown. On October 6, 1981, while reviewing a military parade celebrating the crossing of the Suez Canal in the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, *al-Jihad* militants, led by Lieutenant Khalid al-Islambouli, leapt from a military vehicle and opened fire on the reviewing stands, killing Sadat. Faraj and his coconspirators were emboldened by the Twelver Shi'ite revolution in Iran in 1979 and hoped Sadat's death would trigger a full-scale Sunni revolution throughout Egypt, but it never materialized.³¹ On the contrary, Egyptians were shocked and horrified by Sadat's death, and public sentiment put the radicals in check for a time.³² Al-Tilmisani, meanwhile, remained in prison during the assassination, but immediately

denounced the murder and the violent radicalism of *al-Jihad*, stating:

I oppose violence in any form . . . This is not only a political position, but also a personal position bound in my own character . . . Even if I am oppressed, I shall never turn to violence . . . Never in all my days has it come into my mind to take part in an assassination . . . or a conspiracy against any person . . . regardless of who that person was . . . despite the fact that Sadat was most evil to me . . . I felt sadness.³³

In the 1980s, under Sadat's successor Hosni Mubarak, the Egyptian government sought to use the moderate nonviolent Muslim Brotherhood under al-Tilmisani (although still officially outlawed), and later Hamid Abul-Nasr (d. 1996), as a political counterweight against the radical Islamist factions, allowing them to resume limited political activities and the publication of their periodicals.³⁴ As a first step, Mubarak freed al-Tilmisani and many of the Muslim Brothers arrested during Sadat's "Autumn of Fury" in September of 1981.³⁵ Afterward, al-Tilmisani continued his opposition to the Camp David Accords, but eventually conceded to a "cold peace" between Egypt and Israel so long as relations were never normalized and Israeli economic and cultural incursions were kept safely at bay.³⁶ More importantly, however, al-Tilmisani kept the Muslim Brotherhood firmly on the path of nonviolence and pursued a strategy aimed at achieving full democratic participation within the existing national government, in stark contrast to the revolutionary radicalism of other Islamist factions of the time (with which the Muslim Brotherhood is so often confused). "If there had been a desire for violence and political assassination in the Muslim Brotherhood," he said, "the extremist youth would have joined us, and would not have found the need to join other groups [e.g., *al-Jihad*, *al-Gama'at*, *al-Takfir*]."³⁷ In 1982, al-Tilmisani also declared: "Sayyid Qutb represented himself alone and not the Muslim Brotherhood."³⁸ Rioting and coups, he further said, are done by "those who seek power [only] for their own sake," and "force and violence" are a waste of Egypt's strength and resources, which "benefits no one but the enemies of

the country (e.g., Israel).³⁹ Al-Tilmisani was hardly a partisan of the new regime, but he did bestow some praise on Mubarak, stating: "The people are enjoying freedom and security... We are not enemies of the ruler himself, but rather watch actions alone, and for what is good in them we praise God, and for what is otherwise, we admonish, advise and investigate."⁴⁰ This was the very position that the Muslim Brotherhood espoused when it established an alliance with the secular-nationalist *Wafd* Party (Neo-*Wafd*) prior to the 1984 parliamentary elections. The Brotherhood was, of course, still illegal, and political parties based on religion are forbidden in Egypt, whether Muslim or Coptic. But, barring new arrests, Muslim Brotherhood candidates can run indirectly as independents under the auspices of a legal party's candidate list, such as the *Wafd*, if such an arrangement can be made. "We saw the Wafd as the party closest to us, especially after [the party leader] condemned secularism and affirmed article two of the constitution," al-Tilmisani stated, "[and] the Wafd itself has not killed or tortured any members of the Brotherhood, nor does it pursue them or confiscate their money or possessions."⁴¹ Article two of the Egyptian constitution (to which al-Tilmisani referred), amended by Sadat in May of 1980, states that *shari'ah* is "the principal source of legislation." Thus, in this unlikely arrangement with a secular (or formerly secular) nationalist party, twenty-two Muslim Brotherhood candidates ran for seats in the four hundred and fifty-four seat People's Assembly (*Majlis al-Sha'b*). Eight of the Muslim Brotherhood candidates won seats and fifty Wafdists, unsettling Mubarak's regime.⁴² Following the success, which indicated a serious resurgence of the Society and initiated a Muslim Brotherhood strategy that continues to the present (despite constant government interference), al-Tilmisani would state in June of 1984:

We were completely serious when we joined the elections. Our aim was to reach Parliament through a legal channel, the *Wafd* Party, because People's Assembly members enjoy parliamentary immunity. The Brothers who will reach the Assembly will speak on behalf of the Brotherhood, will urge enforcement of the Islamic *shari'ah* laws, and will embarrass the government on this issue without fear of detention or torture.⁴³

Such tactics were unthinkable to the radical Islamist factions. Not only did al-Tilmisani and the Muslim Brothers participate in a legal democratic process in order to “guide” the existing regime, they even forged an alliance with a traditionally secularist party (including Copts) in the process. This was far from the mythic jihadist revolution espoused by the radical factions. So who exactly was this man who brought these interesting events into being?

The Early Years: 1904–1933

‘Umar ‘Abdul-Fatah ‘Abdul-Qadir Mustafa al-Tilmisani was born to an Algerian family of small landlords in Cairo on November 4, 1904. His paternal grandfather, ‘Abdul-Qadir Pasha al-Tilmisani, brought the family to Egypt from the city of Tilmisan (Tlemcen) in north-western Algeria in 1830, the year of the French invasion. Following the migration, ‘Abdul-Qadir became a successful businessman in the textile trade between Cairo, Khartoum, and Singapore, and acquired seven houses and three hundred acres (*feddan*) in and around Cairo.⁴⁴ The noble title of “Pasha” was conferred upon him by the Ottoman Sultan ‘Abdul-Hamid II (d. 1918) for his many acts of generosity, which included regularly feeding the poor (with *meat* no less), and hiring a boat for Hajj pilgrims unable to afford their journey back to South Asia and Indonesia.⁴⁵ He took great interest in religion, especially the teachings of the Wahhabite founder Muhammad ibn ‘Abdul-Wahhab (d. 1792) and commissioned the publication of several Athari-Wahhabite texts. Many of these works, we are told, are found today in the collections of the Saudi Arabian government.⁴⁶ ‘Abdul-Qadir was also fond of inviting friends and scholars from al-Azhar and elsewhere to his countryside home to engage in spirited discussions and debates about religion and to enjoy great feasts and hospitality.

As a boy, ‘Umar adored the countryside and the life of the rural peasantry (*fellahin*) despite his family’s wealth and social standing. “I used to love everything about the countryside,” he would later say, “the trees...the birds...the simplicity.”⁴⁷ He also loved to swim in nearby irrigation canals, but contracted Bilharzia disease (*Schistosomiasis*) from the waters and suffered from symptoms of the disease for the rest of his life.⁴⁸ In his youth, ‘Umar took great interest

in learning, including matters of religion, but was also a shy and sensitive young man with a special love of music, poetry, and literature. As he would later state:

I love the beauty in everything, in the formative creation of mankind, in the beauty of the bird and its flight, in the grace of the gazelle and the slenderness of its legs, in the patience of the elephants, in the glitter in the eye of the lion and the leopard, in a ripple of water, in the rustle of the leaves of a tree, in the train passing by . . . And although I devoted my interests and feelings to this world, to prayer and fasting, and although I began memorizing the Qur'an and some traditions of the Prophet and religious books as I grew older . . . I was occupied in my free time [of my youth] by [stories of] honor and love and passion . . . First I read a book about Abu Za'id al-Hilali Salama, and then about Antara ibn Shadad, and Sa'if ibn Dhu-Yazan. Then I graduated to reading the novels of Alexander Dumas and his son . . . I read Emile Zola's "The Earth" . . . I read "Les Miserables" . . . I was an avid reader. But despite all of this love of literature, I was not able to be a man of letters or music, despite my love for music and playing the *Oud* [i.e., lute] for years, and I could not be a poet in spite of all my efforts, I failed.⁴⁹

The wealth and prestige of the Tilmisani family afforded 'Umar the opportunity to receive a proper education, learn English, and explore both Arabic and Western culture. He even took dancing lessons, costing him three Egyptian pounds we are told, and learned to do the Fox Trot, the Charleston, and the Tango.⁵⁰ But these cultural excursions in no way hindered his hatred for the British and the colonial occupation of his country, or his deep sorrow and sympathies for the plight of the Egyptian people.

The British had begun their occupation of Egypt in 1882, but the outbreak of World War I in August of 1914 brought drastic changes to Egyptian political life, most notably the establishment of Egypt as a British protectorate.⁵¹ After the Young Turks declared war on the British Empire, the status of Egypt, still technically an Ottoman territory, had to be altered or the Egyptians would legally be regarded as enemy subjects.⁵² As a British protectorate,

legal ties between the Ottomans and Egyptians were severed and the Ottoman Khedive, ‘Abbas II (in Istanbul at the time), was replaced by a new Sultan of Egypt. The war years (1914–1918) placed a tremendous burden on the Egyptians, particularly the *fellahin*, and Cairo became a center of British intelligence operations, the campaign in Palestine, and the defense of the Suez Canal.⁵³ The brutal events of the war, including the deaths of thousands of Egyptians, fostered deep resentment and hatred toward not only the British, but the newly installed Sultan as well. When the war ended, a growing contingent of Egyptian nationalists, led by Sa‘ad Zaghlul (d. 1927), renewed efforts for Egyptian independence and called for negotiations with the British government to end the protectorate. The British, however, refused to meet with Zaghlul and sent him into exile in Malta, provoking a nationwide revolt in 1919, which included Egyptians of all classes, causing widespread destruction and almost nine hundred deaths. In an attempt to restore order, the British allowed Zaghlul to leave Malta, but the revolt continued until 1922 when the British finally conceded and agreed to allow partial independence. For the British, Egypt was a strategically vital territory for maintaining access and communications with India and protecting the Suez Canal. Thus, the British agreed to end the protectorate and to recognize Egypt as an independent monarchy, but still retained a significant military presence, particularly around the Suez, and reserved the right to interfere in Egyptian affairs in their own interests. The occupation thus continued. Under the new monarchy, authority was ostensibly bestowed on Fu‘ad I (d. 1936), who had been the Sultan of Egypt since 1917. In 1923, a constitution was drafted and Egypt made the transition to a constitutional monarchy. Under the new constitution, the hereditary dynasty of the former Ottoman viceroy Muhammad ‘Ali Pasha (d. 1848) was upheld, a bicameral parliament was created, and Islam was established as the state religion, but freedom of worship was protected for Egypt’s Copts and Jews.⁵⁴ In the first parliamentary elections, held in 1924, the same year Mustafa Kemal Ataturk abolished the Ottoman caliphate, Zaghlul and his nationalist party, now called the *Wafd* (“delegation”), took control of the parliament by winning 90 percent of the votes.⁵⁵

In 1914, at the age of ten, ‘Umar began reading the newspaper *al-Maqtam* (named for a range of hills outside of Cairo) and following the events of World War I, hoping, like many Egyptians, to see the British defeated and the hated occupation brought to an end.⁵⁶ As he would later recall of this period:

We saw in that time the despotic behavior of the British High Commissioner, as we called him; the orders were dispatched from the High Commissioner to the Prime Minister, and the men [i.e., Egyptians] were conscripted, despite opposing it, to work for the British Army; the camels and the donkeys were gathered by force, and also the wheat and the corn [was bought] at the smallest possible price and by plowing it, and our generation despised the rule of the British, and [this continued] after the First World War concluded, up until the people took up the revolt in 1919, and these factors continued to affect the hearts of the Egyptians [thereafter].⁵⁷

As he grew older, ‘Umar was swept up in the nationalist fervor led by Zaghlul, and he was a staunch supporter of the *Wafd*. He even joined mass demonstrations outside of ‘Abdin Royal Palace chanting: “Sa‘ad or revolution!”⁵⁸ Then in 1924, ‘Umar entered Cairo University to study law and train like Zaghlul to become a lawyer. “I used to be enamored with the positions of the lawyers in the court sessions,” he would later say, “their legal arguments and rising voices ringing out while the judges sat listening quietly.”⁵⁹ But despite his interest, law school proved to be a considerable challenge, albeit nothing compared to what he would face during his time in the Muslim Brotherhood. ‘Umar married at the young age of twenty, just as he began his studies, and soon had children as well (two sons and two daughters). His responsibilities as a husband and father proved to be an enormous challenge and a distraction from his studies, leading him to miss his classes on more than one occasion. However, he credited his early marriage (which he called “wonderful”) for preserving his chastity and guarding him from a life of self-indulgence, hardly uncommon among the upper classes of his time. “My father decided to have me marry to fulfill half of my religion, even though I had older brothers, but he did not think to marry them off,” he recalled, “but he thought to have me

marry because I was his favorite and nearer to his heart than the others.”⁶⁰ His father, ‘Abdul-Fatah, had been a strict (sometimes severe) disciplinarian during ‘Umar’s youth, and demanded academic excellence from his son. But ‘Umar also felt great love from his father, even though patriarchal customs often prevented him from expressing it. This made it all the more devastating when his father died six months after ‘Umar’s marriage, adding only further to his struggles as a young law student. His affiliation with the *Wafd* proved to be a source of distraction as well, coming during a period of great political turmoil throughout Egypt. The final years of Zaghlul’s life were marked by constant power struggles with the King, and Zaghlul’s successor, Mustafah Nahas Pasha (d. 1965), fared little better. The struggle ultimately prompted King Fu‘ad to suspend Egypt’s Constitution until 1935.

In 1931 ‘Umar completed his law degree and began a period of training in the office of Ibrahim Zaki Bey, a local judge who made his livelihood practicing law. Then in 1933, while working under piles of legal cases in the small city of Shebin al-Qanatir, just north of Cairo, ‘Umar made his first contact with the Muslim Brotherhood. At the time, ‘Umar was living at the Tilmisani countryside estate, eleven kilometers from Shebin al-Qanatir (he traveled back and forth by train and bus), where they raised chickens, pigeons, and rabbits. He and his young family were staying in the *salamlik* or reception room overlooking a small flower garden, when, on a Friday afternoon, two visitors arrived to speak with him:

I was sitting in the flower garden and the estate watchman came to me and said: “Two gentlemen wish to see you.” So I sent away my wife and children and called for the men to come. Then [the two men] arrived, Izzat Muhammad Hasan, who was a butcher in Shebin al-Qanatir, and the other, Muhammad ‘Abdel-Aal, who was a supervisor at the Delta train station in the Abu Zabil quarries. A period [then] passed as we greeted [each other] and drank coffee and tea. [Then] there was a period of silence [until] the butcher broke in saying: “What are you doing here?” And I said jokingly: “Raising chickens!” My playful response did not soften his mood, [as he] remained persistent in his attitude, saying: “There is a thing,

more important than chickens, in need of education through your example.” And I said, still not serious, in response: “And what is that thing in need of education?” He said: “Those Muslims who have abandoned their religion, and the age of power in their own countries, and become nothing” . . . I said: “What concern is that to me? There are governments and the venerable al-Azhar to deal with this task.” And he said: “The Islamic peoples hardly feel their presence. Are you content to invite the great society of *ulama* on the Night of Power during the month of Ramadan for *iftar* at the table of the British High Commissioner . . .?” I said: “Of course not, but what can I do?” He said: “Truly you are not alone today, for there is in Cairo a comprehensive Islamic society called the Muslim Brotherhood, and its leader is a primary school teacher named Hasan al-Banna. And we will determine the date for you to meet with him and become acquainted with his message and the means to implement it.” The latent religious passion [in my heart] broke out within me, so I accepted and agreed to meet the man [Hasan al-Banna].⁶¹

Shortly thereafter, al-Banna met personally with ‘Umar, who in turn gave his *bay‘a*, or oath of allegiance, to him and the mission of the Muslim Brotherhood. As a son of the educated upper classes and the first lawyer in the movement (“defending the oppressed”), ‘Umar was a prize recruit for the nascent Islamist movement. He quickly became a close personal associate of al-Banna and a frequent traveling companion. That same year ‘Umar also accepted a position in the Egyptian Ministry of Finance where he served until 1936, before taking a position in the office of the Public Prosecutor (*Niyabah*) thereafter.

Among the Muslim Brothers: 1933–1973

In its early years, the Muslim Brotherhood placed great emphasis on morality, self-discipline, social welfare, and education, aiming to bring about a new generation of Muslim activists properly educated and trained in “correct” Islamic teachings. The Muslim Brothers registered as a charitable organization and spread their message of Islamic revival to every town and village, often to counter foreign

Christian missionary activities. At this stage, the Muslim Brothers retained a strong Sufi orientation deriving from Hasan al-Banna's prior membership in the Hasafiyyah Sufi order (*tariqah*), but this changed with time and by the 1940s only certain Sufi facets remained. Al-Tilmisani, however, appears to have been shaped, like al-Banna, by this early orientation, as he would state several decades later: "Sufism is fear [and awe] of God [and] not of mankind, it is the conviction that directed our steps... It is the return to all of His commandments... Sufism is the culmination of the faith, of piety, boldness, courage, and purity."⁶² In the mid-1930s the Society was transformed into an active political organization, and al-Banna began to communicate directly with King Fu'ad (d. 1965), the *Wafd*, various opposition parties, and even other Arab governments.⁶³ Al-Tilmisani, as a former member of the *Wafd* himself, served as an important contact between the two groups.⁶⁴ Then from 1937 to 1939, the Palace and the Muslim Brothers worked together against the considerable power of the secular *Wafd*, with various factions jockeying for position, all under the watchful eye of the British Empire. Subsequent relations between the Muslim Brotherhood and the *Wafd* after 1939 would then alternate between periods of opposition and cooperation, including a temporary alliance under al-Tilmisani with the reconstituted *Wafd* in 1984. Meanwhile, in the British Mandate of Palestine, Palestinian Arabs had begun a four-year revolt against the British and the growing presence of Jewish immigrants from Europe, the Soviet Union, and America. Al-Banna mobilized the Society to raise funds and support the Palestinian resistance, earning him the praise of the controversial pro-German Mufti of Jerusalem Hajj Amin al-Husayni. During World War I, the British seized Palestine from the Ottoman Turks and then secretly signed the Sykes-Picot agreement in 1916 and the Balfour Declaration in 1917, which guaranteed the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine.

In 1939 World War II began, and many in Egypt hoped the British would be defeated by the Axis Powers. A year later, al-Banna made contact with Sadat, future president of Egypt, to discuss plans to liberate Egypt from British control.⁶⁵ While anti-imperialist fervor was approaching renewed heights, militant cadres had been active throughout Egypt since the start of the occupation and

political parties of every orientation, including the *Wafd*, *Hizb al-Watani* ("The Nationalist Party"), and *Misr al-Fatah* ("The Young Egypt Party," later known as the Socialist Party), among several others, maintained armed militias engaged in anti-British activities, including assassinations and bombings.⁶⁶ The Muslim Brothers had not yet engaged in such activities. However, as early as 1937, young recruits, more zealous and impatient than their elders, began pressuring the Society for a more radical course of action and began to disobey al-Banna and Muslim Brotherhood leaders.⁶⁷ In 1939, some of the radical dissenters seceded, forming the rival organization *Shabab Muhammad* ("Muhammad's Youth"). Then in 1940 (other reports say 1943), the military wing of the Muslim Brotherhood, called *al-Nizam al-Khass* ("The Special Order") or *al-Jihaz al-Sirri* ("The Secret Apparatus"), was established. The creation of the Special Order, which remained inactive and secretive for years, temporarily offset the pressure for revolutionary action within the Society, but in time the militia grew out of al-Banna's control.⁶⁸

By the 1940s, the Muslim Brotherhood was the largest Islamic organization in Egypt and a major political force. There would be no need for revolutionary action, which would jeopardize their success, so long as Egypt's democratic channels were preserved. But the British were unrelenting in their suppression of Egyptian dissent, especially from the Muslim Brothers, who threatened their influence in the region. Al-Banna was exiled to Upper Egypt (i.e., the south) and temporarily arrested in October of 1941, while the Society's publications were suppressed, and their meetings were forbidden.⁶⁹ The British then forced the Palace at gunpoint to appoint a new government under the *Wafd*, which was later replaced by the Sa'dist Party after the war. In 1942 the Muslim Brotherhood announced plans to participate in parliamentary elections, but the government forced them to withdraw. Al-Banna received some concessions in return. In 1945, the Muslim Brothers again entered parliamentary elections, with al-Banna running in the Society's stronghold of Ismailia where his victory was virtually guaranteed. But the British intervened, rigged the elections, and every Muslim Brotherhood candidate lost.⁷⁰ This enraged and emboldened the radicals already agitating for revolutionary action. Al-Banna

attempted to calm them and urged them to find another way, but things now moved to the breaking point. The British and the Allies had won the war, events in Palestine accelerated, Egypt's economy was devastated (helping the growth of Communism), and the government was under the control of royalists (e.g., Sa'dists) without popular support. Outbreaks of violence now grew between rival political factions, fueled by widespread discontent and militant anti-British and anti-Zionist fervor.

In 1947 the United Nations voted to partition Palestine and thousands of volunteers were openly recruited by Arab governments "to save Palestine," leading al-Banna to activate the still secret Special Order.⁷¹ The Muslim Brotherhood volunteers were organized, trained, and armed under the authority of the Arab League, a union of Arab states founded in March of 1945. An unknown number of Muslim Brothers, including members of the Special Order, fought beside Egyptian and other Arab forces in the first Arab-Israeli War. But in December of 1948, Egypt's royalist government ordered the entire Muslim Brotherhood dissolved, alleging that the Society was plotting an imminent revolution back at home.⁷² Egypt had been under martial law since May due to widespread violence between rival political factions. Then in November, the government uncovered a cache of weapons and documents revealing the existence of the Special Order, and afterward, following riots against the armistice talks over Palestine, the Palace issued the order to dissolve the Society.⁷³ Al-Tilmisani and the entire leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood, except for al-Banna, were arrested and their funds were confiscated. Al-Tilmisani was sent to Huckstep internment camp near Cairo, which was a former American airbase, then transferred along with many other Muslim Brothers and a number of Jews and Communists to al-Tur in the Sinai, where he was interrogated.⁷⁴ At al-Tur, known for its vile and brutal conditions, al-Tilmisani was questioned about the weapons cache and the existence of the Special Order with a gun pressed against his back, replying (sincerely we are told) that he knew nothing about either.⁷⁵ Al-Banna meanwhile desperately tried to salvage the situation, but his efforts were soon undermined by the assassination of the Sa'dist prime minister by a twenty-three-year-old member of the Muslim Brotherhood.⁷⁶ Al-Banna immediately

repudiated the murder and pleaded for the release of the Society's arrested leadership (undoubtedly to regain control), but the government was unmoved. Negotiations were abruptly ended in January of 1949 when a member of the Special Order attempted to bomb a courthouse in Cairo. Al-Banna again publicly repudiated the act, declaring of the perpetrators: "They are neither Brothers, nor are they Muslims."⁷⁷ But shortly thereafter, al-Banna was shot and killed by the government's secret police as he was entering a taxi on the streets of Cairo. The assassination is believed to have been planned, or at least condoned, by the new Sa'dist prime minister Ibrahim 'Abd al-Hadi with the probable support of King Farouk.⁷⁸ Hasan al-Banna was forty-three years old.

After al-Banna's death, the remains of the Muslim Brotherhood were forced underground. Replacing the charismatic al-Banna proved to be difficult, and competing factions emerged to claim the post. In 1951, an Egyptian court ruled that the coup allegations against the Society were "without foundation" and the Muslim Brotherhood was legally reconstituted.⁷⁹ Al-Tilmisani and many others were released, but some faced jail time for various offences, and the young assassin of the prime minister was executed. In December, a new Supreme Guide, Hasan al-Hudaybi (d. 1973), was selected. Due to internal disputes, al-Hudaybi, who was an outsider and respected judge of twenty-five years, was a compromise. Like al-Tilmisani, he was a moderate with an expertise in law and a strong aversion to violence.⁸⁰ But al-Hudaybi proved to be an inept leader lacking the charisma and abilities of his predecessor. He earned animosity and distrust within the Society's ranks quickly, especially from the Special Order. "There is no secrecy in the Message and no terrorism in religion" he said, rebuking the militia and its leaders.⁸¹ That same year, Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966) returned to Egypt from his studies in the United States, resigned his post in the Egyptian Ministry of Education, and joined the ranks of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Also that year, renewed demonstrations broke out throughout Egypt for complete independence from Britain. Unheeded, various factions called for independence by force. Then in January of 1952, the British attacked an Egyptian police station in the Suez Canal zone killing over forty people.⁸² The Egyptians responded

with “the most devastating riot in modern Egyptian history,” leaving modern (i.e., colonial) Cairo in ashes, and calling for all out war against Britain.⁸³ The country began to mobilize for war in the Suez Canal zone, with young men training in military maneuvers and arms. Then on July 23, a secret society of Egyptian military officers, called the “Free Officers,” led by General Muhammad Naguib and Lt. Col. Gamal ‘Abd al-Nasser, occupied Cairo, overthrew Egypt’s monarchy, and seized control of the country. The Officers had strong connections with the Muslim Brothers, beginning with Sadat in the 1940s, and fought alongside them in Palestine during the first Arab-Israeli War. The 1952 revolution was celebrated throughout Egypt and enjoyed the Society’s support, although the Muslim Brothers were never a direct participant in the coup. Al-Hudaybi, in fact, was largely silent on the matter.

After the revolution, initial relations with the Free Officers, some of whom were also Muslim Brothers, were amiable. Sayyid Qutb was even appointed as an advisor to the exclusive Revolutionary Command Council (RCC), and former Palace officials (e.g., ‘Abd al-Hadi) were put on trial for the murder of Hasan al-Banna. But soon it became clear that the Officers had no interest in establishing an Islamic state governed by *shari‘ah* or appointing Muslim Brothers to significant government positions. In 1953 the Officers abolished all political parties, including the *Wafd*, and urged the Muslim Brotherhood to merge itself with the new Liberation Rally Party of the RCC. Al-Hudaybi refused and grew increasingly distrustful of the Officers. Relations rapidly deteriorated from then onward. At the same time, al-Hudaybi was faced with serious internal dissension from the Special Order militia, leading to the Order’s abolition and the expulsion of its leaders from the Society.⁸⁴ But a rebel faction soon began to reconstitute the Order, likely sensing the threat of Nasser and the Officers, without al-Hudaybi’s knowledge.⁸⁵ Then in January of 1954, the RCC, now a vocal opponent of al-Hudaybi, declared that the Society was an adversary of the revolution and officially dissolved it again. Dissension broke out within the RCC, but Nasser emerged in full control. He then initiated a campaign of harassment and confrontation against the Muslim Brotherhood, which culminated with a member of the Special Order firing shots

at Nasser as he gave a major public speech. Unharmful, Nasser finished the speech and made a spectacle of the event, using it as a convenient pretext to launch a two-month campaign to completely annihilate the Muslim Brotherhood.

As the campaign began, all manner of allegations (some truly absurd, such as “Zionists”) were hurled at the Muslim Brothers. Their headquarters and offices were burned, over a thousand members were arrested, and six were executed after a military tribunal. ‘Umar al-Tilmisani, as a member of the Society’s Central Guidance Committee, was sentenced to fifteen years in prison. For ten years of that period, al-Tilmisani did not see his wife. The Supreme Guide al-Hudaybi was given life imprisonment with hard labor (after initially being sentenced to death), and Sayyid Qutb was sentenced to fifteen years. Under Nasser, the Muslim Brothers were subjected to barbaric imprisonment and torture, with several dying in custody, including twenty-one murdered in their cells by prison guards in 1957.⁸⁶ Those who managed to elude Nasser’s prisons and concentration camps regrouped underground. In prison, Sayyid Qutb, who was already a prolific writer, became increasingly radicalized, culminating with his book *Ma‘alim fi’l-Tariq* (“Milestones”) for which he was executed in 1966. In 1965, Nasser unleashed a second crackdown on the resurgent Society, making some eighteen thousand arrests, including the most prominent female member Zaynab al-Ghazali (d. 2005), and killing dozens in custody, all under the familiar charge of an imminent Muslim Brotherhood revolution. After al-Tilmisani’s death in 1986, it was written of him: “Though sometimes referred to as a delicate man, [al-Tilmisani] withstood the tribulation of imprisonment without compromising his integrity as many others did to buy a shorter sentence; he refused to appeal for a pardon that would mean incriminating the Brotherhood.”⁸⁷

After Nasser’s death in 1970, Sadat rejected Nasserism and encouraged Islamist activism against Leftist and Communist factions in the country. He gradually released al-Tilmisani and the Muslim Brothers from prison, restored their confiscated properties, permitted Muslim Brothers exiled abroad to return to Egypt, and allowed them to reconvene meetings and resume their publications.⁸⁸ As a close associate of al-Hudaybi, al-Tilmisani personally went to ‘Abdin

Presidential Palace (formerly the royal palace) to inscribe his thanks, and that of the Society, to Sadat in the public registry, although the Muslim Brotherhood still remained technically illegal.⁸⁹ Then in 1973, the Supreme Guide al-Hudaybi died after many years of poor health. He is said to have recommended a successor to the small and secretive Central Guidance Committee before his death.⁹⁰ However, the candidate of al-Hudaybi's choice apparently declined the offer. The position was then offered to al-Tilmisani, who was already the chief public figure of the Society and the most senior member of the Central Guidance Committee at sixty-seven years of age.⁹¹ He accepted. The shy poet and lover of nature and the arts would now become the most outspoken champion of the Muslim Brotherhood and the heir of the two Hasans. Over the next thirteen years, he proved to be perhaps the most capable and influential Supreme Guide in the history of the Muslim Brotherhood, second only to Hasan al-Banna himself. It should be noted that given the destruction of the original Muslim Brotherhood under Nasser, the contemporary Muslim Brotherhood, which is sometimes referred to as the "Neo-Muslim Brotherhood," must be largely credited to its chief architect and ideologue 'Umar al-Tilmisani.

The Supreme Guide: 1974–1986

In an obituary published by the Society's periodical *al-Da'wah* ("The Call"), 'Umar al-Tilmisani was remembered as *al-Imam al-Zahid* ("the ascetic leader"). It tells us that he never earned more than "eighty Egyptian pounds or fifty American dollars" (contemporary exchange rates greatly differ) and lived, while serving as the Supreme Guide, in a small apartment where the walls and meager furnishings were in need of serious restoration.⁹² The austere ethical Sufism that shaped al-Tilmisani during his early years in the Society may be reflected in such accounts, and it may well have been such ascetic disinterest in worldly things that allowed al-Tilmisani to devote so much time and energy, despite his age and poor health, to the revival of the Muslim Brotherhood. For with the destruction of the Society under Nasser, al-Tilmisani was left with the considerable task of rebuilding the *tanzim* ("organization") of the Muslim Brotherhood from the ground up (largely in secret) and replenishing

its severely depleted ranks. As a lawyer and a member of the educated classes, and by the sheer fact that he was never a member of the Special Order, al-Tilmisani enjoyed the respect of many in Egyptian society, including at times Sadat, and later Hosni Mubarak.⁹³ In July of 1975, Sadat issued a full pardon to the Muslim Brothers imprisoned by Nasser in a conciliatory act toward al-Tilmisani and the Society.

After his release in 1971, al-Tilmisani kept the Society quiet and recruitment efforts remained subdued until 1976, when serious efforts began, most notably among university students, such as the aforementioned 'Abdel-Moneim Abul-Futuh, as well as a range of professional associations and trade unions.⁹⁴ Sadat tolerated the Muslim Brotherhood and gave them relative freedom to operate in return for their nominal support (or restrained opposition) of his regime. However, this unspoken agreement began to crumble as early as 1977, the same year as the notorious "Bread Riots" that followed the elimination of state subsidies on foodstuffs. In October of 1977, al-Tilmisani, ever the lawyer, filed a court case seeking to repeal Nasser's decision to dissolve the Society, arguing that the RCC had lacked legislative and constitutional rights, therefore making its order to dissolve the Society in 1954 illegal, and contending that Sadat's Parties Law of 1976 had cancelled Nasser's decrees outlawing political parties and political organizations, including the Society.⁹⁵ But al-Tilmisani's case, a significant symbolic move at a minimum, was delayed repeatedly during his lifetime and remains unsettled. In all, al-Tilmisani took great pains to try and secure legal channels under which the Society could function openly and publicly.⁹⁶ However, the Society also had to retain its independence and autonomy, which is why al-Tilmisani rejected a series of offers from Sadat, including a seat in the largely ceremonial Consultative Council (*Majlis al-Shurah*) and the opportunity to register the Society as a charitable organization that would have made it financially dependent on the Ministry of Social Justice.⁹⁷ Al-Tilmisani saw the Society as both a mass movement (*harakah*) and an organization (*tanzim*), which, reflecting the aspirations of many in Egypt, had an equal right to full and independent political participation while continuing to exist beyond the political arena. Then in November of 1977,

Sadat flew to Jerusalem to initiate peace talks with Israel, greatly estranging the country's Islamists (as well as many others) from the regime.

In 1976, al-Tilmisani revived the publication of the Society's periodical *al-Da'wah* with Sadat's approval, serving as its coeditor with Mustafah Mashour (the fifth Supreme Guide, d. 2002). The financing of the journal was entrusted to the Islamic Publication and Distribution Company and al-Tilmisani served as the chairman of the board.⁹⁸ After its first issue in July of 1976, *al-Da'wah* became the official mouthpiece of al-Tilmisani's moderate Muslim Brotherhood. However, from 1977 onward, *al-Da'wah* also became an outlet for criticism of Sadat's negotiations with Israel, particularly his failure to resolve the status of the Palestinians and the loss of East Jerusalem. Anti-Jewish sentiment had already become increasingly pervasive in Egypt (previously home to a significant Jewish minority) and the broader Arab world since the 1930s, when Zionist colonization of the British Mandate of Palestine began to accelerate. The subsequent humiliation of the Arab military defeats against Israel, most notably in 1948 and 1967, led to the adoption of European Christian anti-Semitic rhetoric and literature (e.g., *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*) in order to explain the dominance of the Jewish state (despite the perverse irony of Arab anti-Semitism). *Al-Da'wah* was no different, and Jews were portrayed in its pages as the enemies of all Muslims who seek to control, subjugate, and corrupt the entire world.⁹⁹ Israel had also captured one of Islam's holiest sites, the ancient Noble Sanctuary (*al-Haram ash-Sharif*) containing the Dome of the Rock and *al-Aqsa* mosque, and it was inconceivable to them that Sadat would dare abandon it to non-Muslim occupiers. *Al-Da'wah* thus rejected any negotiations with the Jewish state, and boldly questioned the Islamic legitimacy of Sadat's regime.¹⁰⁰ At the same time, however, al-Tilmisani went on record to affirm a more balanced perspective, stating: "I am not one of those who speaks of driving Israel into the sea or claiming that we will declare victory in Tel Aviv, for all these gleaming slogans are without balance."¹⁰¹ Instead, al-Tilmisani proposed solving the Arab-Israeli conflict through the international courts under the auspices of the United Nations, which, in his view, would see all occupied territory and property returned to the Palestinians. He also

expressed support and approval of the Palestinian popular resistance against Israel, although it should be noted that he never lived to see the emergence of Palestinian suicide bombers in the early 1990s. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that al-Tilmisani would have rejected the disturbingly violent and inherently indiscriminate tactics of Palestinian suicide bombers had he lived to see them. He also spoke regularly of the concept of *jihad* in the broadest possible sense, which ranged from self-discipline and purification, to speaking the truth in the face of a tyrant (e.g., Nasser or Sadat), to armed struggle on the battlefield, but he always seemed to favor court battles to those waged with a sword or a gun. After five years, during which the magazine continued to grow in popularity, *al-Da'wah* was ultimately banned along with all nongovernmental press by Sadat in September of 1981 during the "Autumn of Fury."¹⁰² Afterward, *al-Da'wah* resurfaced again in Europe for several more years.

During Nasser's assault on the Society from 1954 to 1970, many of the Brothers that eluded imprisonment fled to Saudi Arabia, including Sayyid Qutb's brother Muhammad Qutb. In Saudi Arabia, several Muslim Brothers amassed large personal fortunes. So when Sadat initiated his dramatic and controversial economic reforms, known as *al-Infitah*, which opened the country to privatization, foreign investment, and capitalism, the Muslim Brothers and their sympathizers took full advantage. After his release from prison in 1982, al-Tilmisani, as he resumed rebuilding and recruitment efforts, was pressed over the role that certain Muslim Brothers were playing in the *Infitah* and replied: "I do not doubt that some rich Muslim Brothers are helping to resolve the problems of *Infitah* in the consumer sector, but I deplore this, for the economic opening must benefit production first of all."¹⁰³ Al-Tilmisani, the *Imam al-Zahid*, once wrote an article in *al-Da'wah* entitled "Should Muslims Go Hungry, No One is Entitled to Wealth," wherein he argued:

If we do not take from the rich to spend on the poor aren't we violating the dicta of the Holy Qur'an, aren't we subjecting our nation and government to God's wrath?... These embezzlements which we read about every day could have been eradicated if the pure and the faithful were in charge.¹⁰⁴

Yet, despite al-Tilmisani's concerns over corruption and growing economic inequalities, the Society was benefiting and quietly regaining its considerable hold on Egyptian society through the new economic openings, rebuilding the expansive multidimensional Society that had once been all but annihilated.

In 1983, al-Tilmisani began to consider having the Muslim Brotherhood run in parliamentary elections. "Mubarak's 1983 electoral law institutionalized the political culture of *hizbiyyah* (party politics) and thus compelled the Muslim Brothers to think in terms of *hizbiyyah* if they wanted to enjoy the protection of a legal umbrella."¹⁰⁵ The idea was a controversial one and hotly debated in the Society's ranks, and ultimately culminated with a large secret meeting in Cairo wherein al-Tilmisani persuaded the Society's members over to his position.¹⁰⁶ In his view, the Society should stop functioning as a secret movement (which it had done since 1954), explore all possible ways of propagating their ideas, engage in the political process, and gain further political experience that would allow them to persuade ministers and officials of the Society's good intentions and to reform laws according to the *shari'ah*.¹⁰⁷ The issue of party politics had long been a source of contention among the Muslim Brothers, going back to the time of Hasan al-Banna. Parties were the fault lines of disputes and ideological divisions in Egypt and in the Society's view they failed to serve the best interests of the nation (and *ummah*) as a whole. Al-Tilmisani's disapproval of divisive rhetoric and institutions (which often led to ambiguities in the Society's positions) extended into all areas of his life as well, as he said: "I am not inclined to disputation (*al-jadal*) and I would often leave if I saw it in a discussion, even if the answer was clear at the time of the dispute."¹⁰⁸ Such statements are indicative of what appears to have been a common tendency of al-Tilmisani to avoid disputes, including theological ones, unless absolutely necessary.

In 1979, the Iranian revolution emboldened many Egyptian Islamists, especially the most radical factions. An "Islamic state" had finally emerged in the region, instituted *shari'ah* (or some interpretive version thereof), and removed a secular "tyrant" from power along with the shackles of Western imperialism. But the Iranian revolution was achieved by Twelver Shi'ites under the leadership

of Shi'ite clerics invoking a foreign religious doctrine (*velayat-e faqih*). No such hierarchical priesthood exists in Sunni Islam, and Sunnism (Islamism in particular) could even be described as strongly anti-clerical. None of the Muslim Brotherhood's Supreme Guides have been members of the *ulama*. They had careers as teachers, doctors, or lawyers. The new "Islamic Republic" that emerged in the wake of the Iranian revolution, built on the idiosyncratic theories and beliefs of the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (d. 1989), hardly matched the political visions espoused by Sunni Islamists in Egypt or abroad. Interestingly, after fleeing from Iran (on "vacation"), Shah Reza Pahlevi took refuge in Egypt by invitation of Sadat (not helping his popularity). Al-Tilmisani opposed his arrival along with other Egyptian Islamist factions, chiefly the radical *Gama'at*. When the Shah died of cancer in 1980, he was entombed (where he remains today) in a rear chamber of the *al-Rifa'i* mosque in old Cairo, not far from the tombs of King Fu'ad and King Farouk. Initially there was enthusiasm and support for developments in Iran by al-Tilmisani, but he was quick to remind people that the Muslim Brothers were the disciples of Hasan al-Banna (*al-Imam al-Shahid*) and not Ruhollah Khomeini. Egypt's Islamists certainly had no interest in ceding leadership of the "Islamic revival" to a foreign Shi'ite cleric. Iran was also a Persian state, and Arab nationalist sensibilities were present even in movements like the Muslim Brotherhood that rejected such ethnic divisions in Islam.¹⁰⁹ The early enthusiasm for Iran's revolution thus soon turned to criticism. Al-Tilmisani disapproved of Iran's brazen calls for *jihad* and revolution throughout the Islamic world, and saw the political infighting taking place in Iran as shameful and an embarrassment to Islam.¹¹⁰ As we have already seen, al-Tilmisani rejected revolutionary tactics, like those of *al-Jihad* (which praised Iran), and the use of violence to overthrow a ruling regime. When U.S. president Jimmy Carter and Anwar Sadat sought al-Tilmisani's help in ending the Iranian hostage crisis, the Supreme Guide and the Muslim Brotherhood were denounced as "American agents" by Khomeini's regime.¹¹¹ Al-Tilmisani, it is said, informed Khomeini that it was a sin in Islam to take diplomats as hostages—an undoubtedly bold statement to a Shi'ite cleric who saw himself as the definitive interpreter of Islam.¹¹²

Tensions between Khomeini's revolutionary Shi'ite regime and al-Tilmisani's Society then increased further with the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war (1980–1988). The Muslim Brothers, already staunch opponents of Ba'athism (the ruling secular ideology in Syria and Iraq), initially denounced Saddam Hussein (a nominal Sunni) as the wrongful aggressor in the war and criticized Muslim states that took sides in the conflict, strongly denouncing divisive rhetoric between Muslims.¹¹³ Instead, al-Tilmisani called for a meeting of Muslim leaders to bring an end to the war, and suggested an international conspiracy, led by Israel, had played a role in the conflict.¹¹⁴ But even in his rebuke of the two warring countries, al-Tilmisani refused to indulge in sectarian Sunni-Shi'ite rhetoric, even as Iran continued the war and rejected peace offers. Like Hasan al-Banna before him, he avoided divisive issues, including matters of dogma, unless absolutely necessary, such as on the aforementioned question of *takfir*. "We are Muslims, both Arab and non-Arab," he said, "and this is more accurate and more inclusive in strengthening harmony, good relations, and progress among the whole."¹¹⁵ The unity of the *ummah*, shaken by the divisive trauma of colonialism and the abolition of the caliphate, was of utmost importance. As such, while certainly aware of the differences between the two main branches of Islam and a staunchly devout Sunni himself, al-Tilmisani did not, as many contemporary Islamists have done, promote anti-Shi'ite teachings. In fact, aside from the denunciations of "Crusader" conspiracies against Islam that we find in the pages of *al-Da'wah*, al-Tilmisani encouraged unity between Muslims and Copts in Egypt, and sometimes spoke favorably of the United States as "People of the Book" in contrast to the godless Soviet Union.

Political parties based on religion are banned in Egypt under the notion that they threaten national unity, namely between Muslims (90 percent of the population) and Copts (9 percent of the population). Copts, in fact, had become frequent targets of violence and robberies by the *Gama'at* and other radicals since the 1970s. Coptic communities were seen as obstacles to the creation of an Islamic state, hostile to Islam in general (which was sometimes the case), and proponents of secularism (historically they were major supporters of the *Wafd*). In contrast, al-Tilmisani, like al-Banna before him

(who had Coptic Christian advisors), called for peaceful coexistence with the Coptic minority, emphasizing that in Islam's early years "Byzantine employees filled the offices of the Islamic government [i.e., the Umayyad dynasty] and during the era of the 'Abbasids, Christians participated in government and, during the era of the Fatimids [in Egypt], Copts served in the ministries."¹¹⁶ Al-Tilmisani even went so far as to say that "love is the symbol of the Society of the Muslim Brotherhood."¹¹⁷ Christians, in his view, were not at all to be excluded from an Islamic government, although they could not serve as the head of state. Such views are largely at odds with modern Athari thought, which generally nullifies the inconvenient details of history and emphasizes exclusively the mythical utopian paradigm of Medina. At the very least, such statements suggest that the realities of political engagement had revealed the significance of the historical heritage of Islamic thought to al-Tilmisani, who clearly drew from a plurality of viewpoints in his positions. Intellectual, political, and doctrinal developments over the course of Islamic history occurred not in the spirit of *bid'ah* or innovation (although that was sometimes the case) as the Wahhabite-Atharis contend, but rather in response to the pragmatic and often ugly and chaotic realities of governance. The history and development of Islamic theology was directly shaped and cultivated in a myriad of ways by these very same realities, making the potential correlations in the modern context all the more alluring.

As the leader of the largest and most influential Islamist movement, 'Umar al-Tilmisani was a figure of great but largely unrecognized importance in the history of modern Islam. His complicated and often turbulent life is a vivid illustration of the diversity and complexity of Islamist thought and greatly problematizes pervasive monolithic understandings of Islamism. This chapter has emphasized the important demarcation of al-Tilmisani's moderate, nonviolent Islamism, from the revolutionary radicalism of groups such as *al-Gama'at*, *al-jihad*, and *al-Takfir* (among others). It also emphasized the importance of seeing Islamism, especially the Muslim Brotherhood, within its proper historical framework, particularly the colonial experience. There are indeed a wide range of factors that have played a role in the rise of Islamism in the modern world and the demarcation of contending Islamist factions, namely between moderates and radicals.

However, the focus of this analysis remains the demise of theology (*‘ilm al-kalam*) and its unique impact and role as one of several contributors to these developments. Thus far we have seen the product of rival creeds (Ash‘arite versus Athari) in the political sphere. We will now examine a case involving the Maturidite school and its relationship to arguably the most infamous Islamist movement of recent time, the Taliban.

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CHAPTER 5

The Taliban and the Maturidite School

Few places in the Islamic world have seen as much Islamist activity in recent years as Afghanistan and Pakistan. Thus no analysis of Islamism and its important ties to Athari thought is complete without some discussion of the region and its most well-known movement, the Taliban. The origins of the Taliban are complex and interwoven with an elaborate web of ethnic conflict, political ambition, ideological warfare, and economic interests. But at its root, the story of the Taliban begins with the madrasas of western Pakistan and the interference of foreign powers in the affairs of South Asia. The dominant Sunni school of law in South Asia is the Hanafi *maddhab*. This would suggest that the Sunni Muslims of Pakistan and their institutions of religious learning are also associated with the Maturidite school of theology, or at least its creedal manifestation. That would include the Sunni Muslims of the modern reform-minded Deobandi madrasa movement. But the turbulent events of the last forty years dramatically changed the religious landscape of the region and displaced the normative Hanafi Sunnism that had been dominant there for centuries. This chapter explores those events and demonstrates that the Taliban movement is the product of distinctly Athari madrasas, funded and mobilized by Wahhabite-Atharis in the Persian Gulf and their Pakistani allies for the sake of political and economic interests. As such, claims that the Taliban is somehow a

representative of the Maturidite school of theology are erroneous and demonstrate a flawed understanding of the history of Sunni theology and the region.

In the nineteenth century, the British Empire and Czarist Russia competed for control of Afghanistan in the so-called Great Game. The British were interested in having a buffer to protect India, the prized territory of their colonial holdings. So in 1878 the British invaded Afghanistan, after previously being expelled, and claimed eastern Afghan territory for British India. Then, when Pakistan was created during the partition in 1947, the western border of the new Muslim nation-state divided the geographic homeland of the Pashtuns, the dominant ethnic group of Afghanistan that had ruled the area for several centuries. Even today, these border provinces, such as the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP), continue to exist as largely autonomous tribal regions outside of the Pakistani central government's control. At the time of the partition, there were a modest 137 madrasas in all of Pakistan.¹ But in the 1970s, the number of madrasas began to increase exponentially into the thousands. The governments of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, both Wahhabite-Athari in orientation, were alarmed by the growing prominence of Leftists in Pakistani politics and responded by funding a range of Islamic activities and institutions, including hundreds of new madrasas, to bolster Pakistan's Islamic identity.² These policies accelerated and took on greater zeal during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan beginning in December of 1979 and throughout the ensuing military conflict that lasted until 1989.

Fear of a Soviet-backed Communist regime in Afghanistan prompted Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states to use their substantial funds and ties to the growing madrasa network in Pakistan to create and train Muslim soldiers willing to cross the border and fight the godless Soviets in the name of Islam.³ As a result, the new generation of madrasas that developed were "equally if not more concerned with [holy war] than with religious scholarship."⁴ Meanwhile, the bloody conflict in Afghanistan had also created hundreds of thousands of refugees who fled across the border and settled in the western provinces of Pakistan. The Pashtun men who would later form the Taliban were largely the children of these refugee camps, educated in Wahhabite-Athari madrasas in Pakistan designed to create holy

warriors. The “education” these young men received was rudimentary at best and largely restricted to memorization of the Qur’an in Arabic—a language they did not understand—and certain Hadith, the meanings and choice of which were transmitted to the students in the vernacular through the subjective intercession of “barely literate” teachers pursuing the aforementioned ideological agenda.⁵ “Neither teachers nor students had any formal grounding in mathematics, science, history or geography . . . not even the history of their own country [i.e., Afghanistan].”⁶ The rich complexities and systematic rationalism of Sunni theology was certainly not a part of their world. Furthermore, any identity or self-knowledge that the students possessed was the ideological construction of the madrasas, shaped by an impoverished world of warfare that offered few alternatives to life and “martyrdom” on the battlefield. The believers who selflessly fought the heretic, the hypocrite, and the infidel, while pursuing the promise of martyrdom and a utopian Islamic society, were the ideal of Afghan manhood (even personhood) in those classrooms and camps. The localized strain of Wahhabite-Athari Islam they found in those madrasas reinforced that vision in every way.

The Deobandi madrasa movement, with which the Taliban is often associated, began at the old Chatta Masjid at Deoband, near Delhi, in 1867, and emulated the British bureaucratic style of educational institutions with a formal curriculum and required examinations.⁷ The Deobandi founders, like the Salafi movement in nineteenth century colonial Egypt, were part of the broader Sunni reformist movement of the time dedicated to purifying and reviving Islam in response to the decline and subjugation of Muslims to the European colonial powers, principally the British and the French. As part of their program, the madrasa at Deoband taught the *Dars-i Nizami*, a curriculum developed at Farangi Mahall in the eighteenth century, but with important modifications, including a strong emphasis on the study of Hadith as the crowning subject of study and the basis of correct practice and belief, which also made the Shaykh ul-Hadith the most influential teacher at the school.⁸ The school furthermore de-emphasized the rational sciences, such as logic and philosophy, which had been a chief element of the Nizami teaching.⁹ In keeping with their emulation of the British system, the Deobandis also worked to create a network of satellite or

branch campuses. These affiliated schools were subject to Deobandi control of their curriculum and administration, including periodic inspections, but were never formally integrated into a single educational system.¹⁰ In some cases, ties were limited to institutional leadership by a Deoband graduate or simply informal imitation of the Deobandi model. By the end of the nineteenth century, there were some fifty such schools, including a Deobandi madrasa in the traditionally Pashtun city of Peshawar.¹¹

The rapid growth of the Deobandi network and its graduates soon led to increasing involvement in politics. The most prominent Deobandi political organization was the Jamiyyat Ulama-i Hind (“Society of Indian Ulama,” or JUH).¹² But as the partition movement moved forward, despite vocal opposition from the JUH, a new Deobandi organization took shape to preserve Deobandi influence in the territories of the future Muslim state of Pakistan called the Jamiyyat Ulama-i Islam (JUI).¹³ By the 1970s, the JUI, under the leadership of Mawlana Mufti Mahmud (d. 1980), was a chief recipient of the aforementioned Wahhabite-Athari support from the Gulf monarchies, chiefly Saudi Arabia. In Pakistan, the regime of General Muhammad Zia ul-Haqq also actively patronized the growth of the madrasas as part of a broader Islamization campaign designed to weaken the support of his Leftist and secular-nationalist rivals. The JUI’s leader Mufti Mahmud was an ethnic Pashtun from NWFP and briefly held the position of chief minister in the province. By the 1980s, under Mahmud’s son Fazl ur-Rahman, the JUI controlled hundreds of madrasas instructing Afghan refugees and their children. In the border provinces of NWFP and Baluchistan, these madrasas were militarized for the nearby Afghan war, combining traditional Athari religious education with a modern military one.¹⁴ From 1980 onward, the madrasas also became major recipients of *zakat* funds that the government of Zia ul-Haqq collected.¹⁵ “The Zia regime encouraged the proliferation of madrasas by increasing opportunities for employment of their graduates in government agencies and state institutions.”¹⁶

The withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in February 1989 left a power vacuum that was filled by Afghan warlords and their sectarian and ethnic rivals. The Afghan Mujahideen, which included many foreign fighters (e.g., “Afghan Arabs”) such as Ayman

al-Zawahiri, had waged a “successful” guerilla war to drive out the Soviets and emboldened jihadist ideologues throughout the Muslim world in the process. But their success quickly turned to chaos as civil war broke out among the numerous Afghan factions across the country. By 1992, the capital city of Kabul was under the control of ethnic Tajik and Uzbek Mujahideen factions. For three centuries, Afghanistan had been ruled by ethnic Pashtuns from the Durrani tribe of Kandahar, a major Afghan center of trade and religious pilgrimage. As Ahmed Rashid has noted, the fall of Kabul to the Tajiks and Uzbeks was “a devastating psychological blow because for the first time in 300 years the Pashtuns had lost control of the capital” and its loss rallied the Pashtuns to launch an assault on the city.¹⁷ By the end of 1994, the warlords and their ever-changing alliances had kept Afghanistan in a constant state of conflict and ruin, fraught with pillaging, murder, and rape. In response to the chaos and constant warfare, a group of current and former Pashtun madrasa students gathered in Kandahar to discuss a way to restore order and peace to their country. They called themselves the Taliban, the plural form of the Arabic word *talib*, meaning “student” in reference to their studies in the madrasas, mainly in Pakistan. Their chosen leader was an intensely private, but reportedly pious, individual from Kandahar known as Mullah Omar.

According to the dominant narrative, the Taliban began their mobilization in the spring of 1994 when Mullah Omar was informed that a local warlord and his forces had kidnapped and repeatedly raped two teenage girls.¹⁸ Omar and a small group of Taliban, only lightly armed, attacked the camp, executed the warlord, and freed the two girls, capturing arms and ammunition in the process.¹⁹ Months later in Kandahar, a violent conflict broke out between two warlords who each wanted to rape the same young boy and Omar’s Taliban again intervened to restore order and free the boy.²⁰ Increasingly, the people of Kandahar turned to the Taliban to bring order and justice back to the war-torn city and surrounding countryside. The nascent Taliban’s closest allies were next door in Pakistan, where many of the Taliban had grown up and studied in madrasas run by Fazl ul-Rahman and the JUI, now allies of Pakistan’s female prime minister, Benazir Bhutto (d. 2007).²¹ Pakistan meanwhile desperately wanted an ally in Kabul that would open secure trade routes into the Central Asian republics

and safely protect their convoys. Bhutto's government previously supported the notorious Pashtun warlord and leader of the Hizb-e Islami Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, but his military failures and lack of popular support left the Pakistanis looking for a new Pashtun proxy.²² They found it in the Taliban.

With Pakistan's support, the Taliban seized a large supply of arms and vehicles from Hekmatyar near Spin Baldak that reportedly included eighteen thousand Kalashnikov assault rifles.²³ In November 1994, the Taliban successfully captured Kandahar, the second largest city in Afghanistan, and lost only a dozen men in the process.²⁴ Goods from Central Asia now traveled through the south to and from Pakistan. Meanwhile, the success of the Taliban at Kandahar inspired twenty thousand Afghans and hundreds of Pakistani madrasa students from the refugee camps, with the blessings and encouragement of their instructors, to stream across the border to join Mullah Omar, most of them between the ages of fourteen and twenty-four.²⁵ Over the next two years, thousands more would travel across the Pakistan border to join the Taliban's military advance from province to province throughout Afghanistan, culminating with the fall of Kabul in September 1996.

In the years since their rise to power in Afghanistan, the Taliban movement has extended well beyond the displaced Pashtun youths of the refugee camps. At present, in 2009, one of their former patrons, the government of Pakistan, pursues a full military offensive against the Taliban within its own borders. Not unlike al-Qaeda, the Taliban has become a movement quite apart from the complex historical and sociological roots of the original militant group. Since the American offensive against the Taliban in Afghanistan after September 11, 2001, the "Taliban" has shifted to a range of groups with their own leadership structures from various regions throughout the subcontinent. In 2007, over two dozen of these groups in Pakistan nominally merged as an umbrella movement called the Tehreek-e-Taliban under Baitullah Mehsud (d. 2009), and numerous other factions, such as Lashkar-e-Taiba or Hizb-e-Islami Khalis, remain ideological kin to the Taliban despite a lack of explicit association.²⁶ It must be noted too that the political climate of the time has made religion essential to any claims of political legitimacy among these factions and in many cases the

actual religious orientation of these militants (or criminals) may be wildly overstated. Reports of barbarity and impiety among these men are certainly well known. However, the systems that these groups seek to impose are indeed “Islamic,” even if only in the most nominal sense, and they therefore call us back to the question issued at the outset. Is the Islamic system of the Taliban and its affiliates Maturidite in origin?

In chapter one, we reviewed the doctrines of the Maturidite school of Sunni theology alongside the other “orthodox” school, the Ash’arites. We saw the evident theological rationalism present in Maturidite doctrines and found them akin to the Ash’arites. So far we have traversed a brief history of how the Taliban movement began and the complex circumstances that displaced the normative Hanafi Sunnism in South Asia, including the original orientation of the reformist Deobandi movement. As Ahmed Rashid has written: “The Taliban have clearly debased the Deobandi tradition of learning and reform, with their rigidity, accepting no concept of doubt except as sin, and considering debate as little more than heresy.”²⁷ This certainly fits well within our understanding of Athari thought. But situating the Taliban properly within the historical genealogy presented in this book is a difficult task. Intellectually, the rudimentary nature of the movement has meant that there is no “Taliban Islamic manifesto” or scholarly exposition of their Islamic thought to assist us.²⁸ In July 2009, Mullah Omar released a thin booklet in Pashto outlining the rules of conduct for Taliban fighters, but it tells us almost nothing in terms of a systematic exposition of their worldview.

The small booklet, entitled “The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan: Rules for the Mujahideen,” consists of sixty-seven articles organized into thirteen chapters addressing the subjects of security, prisoners, dealing with enemy spies and collaborators, the distribution of booty, organization of provincial leadership, obedience to military commanders, education (very brief), business, conduct toward civilians, the danger of vices, as well as other strategic recommendations. The appearance of the text says a good deal about the problems endemic within the Taliban movement and the warlord culture in Afghanistan as a whole, but it tells us virtually nothing about the Taliban’s beliefs or broader worldview. For example, Mullah Omar relates that kidnapping is forbidden, that confessions obtained through force, fear,

or torture are not valid, and that Taliban fighters should avoid tribal, linguistic, and regional prejudices and land conflicts.²⁹ The text is not a religio-juridical justification for the Taliban and their methods in the way *Milestones* or *The Neglected Duty* has been for other Islamist groups. It is a set of strategic guidelines and principles designed to win the trust or “hearts and minds” of the Afghan people and bring greater discipline and order to the Taliban’s scattered and infamous ranks. There is very little substance to it in terms of a comprehensive ideology. Perhaps one of the most telling passages in the text comes in the form of the opening sentence that states: “Jihad in the path of God is a religious duty for each Muslim.”³⁰ The statement may seem redundant coming from the Taliban, but its prominence as the opening sentence of the text (after the obligatory *bismillah*) reiterates the core precept of the movement, which is waging military jihad. The Taliban articulates little in the way of a systematic belief system beyond rudimentary Islamic rhetoric that carries cultural resonance among Afghans and provides a religious framework or veneer to their efforts and behavior. After all, in Afghanistan, even the Communists used to pray. Warfare lies at the very heart and soul of the Taliban. In contrast, jihad had never been a priority of the Deobandis since their inception in 1867, as they focused instead on the survival of the Muslim community as a minority in Hindu dominated India through meticulous adherence to *shari’ah*.³¹ One must wonder then what the Taliban would even look like if there was no war to fight in Afghanistan. In the absence of an intellectual or ideological “manifesto,” we are left with only a smattering of the Taliban’s judgments and reports of their behavior to analyze and juxtapose with Maturidite doctrine.

The Taliban’s ruling on the duty of a Muslim man to grow his beard is one of the most unusual and striking of their many eccentric edicts. Issued in a list of legal decrees by Mullah Omar following the capture of Kabul in 1996, it states: “[You must] prevent beard shaving and its cutting; after one and a half months if anyone is observed who has shaved and/or cut his beard, they should be arrested and imprisoned until their beard gets bushy.”³² Imprisoning or lashing Muslim men for shaving or trimming their beards is unheard of elsewhere in the Muslim world, even in Wahhabite Saudi Arabia. But such an extreme edict is telling. It clearly reflects the Athari

preoccupation with outward practice over inward belief or virtue, not unlike the Athari emphasis on the outward literal meaning of the sacred texts. However, a mandate for Muslim men to grow their beards is not found anywhere in the pages of the Qur'an. Rather, the notion comes to us via prophetic traditions in the Hadith, likely a carryover from Jewish Talmudic tradition, and the majority of Sunni scholars consider it "sunnah" for a man to grow a beard, by which they mean it is a meritorious but not obligatory act. Even the king and royal ministers of Saudi Arabia do not grow their beards (often choosing an elegant moustache instead), even though their kingdom shares much in common with the Taliban movement they once actively supported.

The thinking behind the Taliban's mandate on beards is derived from a particular textual methodology. The Qur'an establishes the founding postulate by commanding all believers to obey God, His Messenger (Muhammad), and those in positions of authority (see 4:59). In the authoritative (*sahih*) collections of Hadith, penned some two centuries after the Prophet's death, we find several traditions stating that Muhammad himself grew a beard (as the Jews and Christian monks did at the time). In one tradition, recorded in al-Bukhari, the Prophet is further reported to have said: "Do the opposite of the pagans (*al-mushrikin*) and leave the beard to grow abundant and trim the moustache."³³ The same Hadith elaborates on the authority of Ibn 'Umar that the Prophet used to grasp his beard with his hand and cut off what exceeded a handful in length. As such, by following this line of textual sources, the case can be made that following the Prophet's example by growing a beard is a pious and meritorious act. However, unlike textual prohibitions against slandering chaste women or fornication, the sources say nothing about legal punishments, such as public lashings (or worse), that have been carried out by the Taliban for failing to adhere to this mandate. The Hadith collections also tell us that the Prophet Muhammad and his companions fought their battles with swords and rode camels. Perhaps the Taliban should punish Muslims in Afghanistan who ride in "pagan" American and Japanese trucks wielding Russian Kalashnikov assault rifles as well. But reason is not the operating force behind such views. Rather, the Taliban's Athari orientation is made abundantly clear to us once again. According to the Athari view, *iman* is found in one's

actions. Therefore, failure to observe an outward act of piety, such as daily prayer or growing a beard, is evidence of moral or spiritual deviance, or at worst, it is evidence of apostasy. The punishments for these crimes are known, even if a punishment for not sufficiently growing a beard is not.

The heretical practice of *takfir* (declaring a Muslim to be an apostate) among the Taliban provides further insight regarding their creedal orientation. *Takfir* has grown to considerable prominence in the modern Muslim world, especially among radical Islamists, due to the popularity of the works of the medieval Athari scholar Ibn Taymiyyah, who invoked *takfir* while questioning the religious commitment of the Mongol (Tatar) rulers of the fourteenth century (CE). But the origins of the practice go back much farther in Islamic history. *Takfir* is a defining feature of the Kharijites; the Muslims who rebelled against the Rightly Guided Caliph ‘Ali ibn Abu Talib declared him an unbeliever, and assassinated him in 661 CE. Those zealous practitioners of *takfir* were considered heretics, outside of Islam, and worthy of annihilation by ‘Ali and subsequent caliphs and scholars. In contrast, the eponym of the Ash‘arite school of Sunni theology, Abu’l Hasan al-Ash‘ari, stated in the early tenth century: “It is our opinion that we ought not to declare a single one of the people of the *qiblah* [i.e., Muslims] an infidel for a sin of which he is guilty, such as fornication or theft or the drinking of wine, as the [Kharijites] hold, thinking that such people are infidels.”³⁴ Abu Mansur al-Maturidi reportedly shared (independently) the Ash‘arite position. Both of the Sunni theological schools, as we discussed in chapter one, emphasized the important distinction between *iman* (“faith”), which resides in the heart, and outward actions. This distinction did not exist among the Kharijites who fought and killed the fourth Rightly Guided Caliph of Sunni Islam, ‘Ali ibn Abu Talib, in the seventh century (CE) and it does not exist among the Atharis, including the Taliban, today.

The history of Hanafi Sunnism in South Asia is a long and rich one. But the emergence of modern Islamic movements in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and elsewhere in South Asia should not mislead us into making false theological correlations, especially amidst the current absence of active theological discourse in the Sunni Muslim world. The Taliban is not a representative of the Maturidite school of *kalam*

or even its creedal manifestation. Their orientation is clearly Athari; however, the complex history of the movement suggests that the Taliban may be better described as the product of Cold War conflict and regional politics in South Asia than by any sectarian school of thought, Sunni or otherwise.

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CHAPTER 6

The Promise of Ash'arite Semiotics

In his important study *Public Religions in the Modern World*, sociologist Jose Casanova describes the “deprivatization” of religions on a global scale since the 1970s.¹ This phenomenon has forced many scholars to rethink previously hegemonic theories of secularization that envisioned the increasing marginalization of religion within the public sphere in favor of positivist, secular-humanist societies. As the world has seen, forecasts of religion’s public demise have proven far too hasty, and, with the exception of the phenomenon of differentiation remaining valid (i.e., delineated conceptions of religious and secular spheres), have left classical theories of secularization largely bankrupt. Contemporary societies must then address the reality of “public religions,” or the repoliticization of religions that have rejected the marginalized, privatized status afforded or forced upon them by modernity, and to grapple with the sensitive and potentially explosive dynamics of religion and the modern nation-state. This reality is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in contemporary Muslim societies. In his study *Islamic Liberalism: A Critique of Development Ideologies*, Leonard Binder has argued that the formation and success of political liberalism in contemporary Muslim nation-states will ultimately depend on the ability of Muslim scholars and theorists to formulate a “vigorous Islamic liberalism.”² By “liberalism,” Binder refers to the notion that the common good for any historical group may be arrived at by means of rational discourse, thereby creating a distinction and differentiation between knowledge and opinion and the possibility

of an opinion which has become hegemonic to change.³ For “Islamic liberalism” then:

The language of the Qur’an is coordinate with the essence of revelation, but the content and meaning of revelation is not essentially verbal. Since the words of the Qur’an do not exhaust the meaning of revelation, there is a need for an effort at understanding which is based on the words, but which goes beyond them, seeking that which is represented or revealed by language.⁴

As such, this is not to suggest that such an Islamic liberalism would mirror the liberal ideologies of Western Europe or the United States in an Islamic veneer. Rather, it would meet the unique challenges and needs of the contemporary Muslim world on its own terms, while avoiding unmanageable conflict with a “public Islam.” Accepting the validity of the arguments of Casanova and Binder, this chapter examines Ash‘arite theology (the dominant school of Sunni theology or *kalam*) and its potential as a basis for just such a vigorous Islamic liberalism.

When we survey the most notable modernist and reformist trends in contemporary Islam, we find that scholars and theorists have focused largely on matters of law and jurisprudence (*fiqh*). This should come as no surprise given that Sunni Islam is perceived to be a religion of orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy. Law has also been one of the most active and radically shifting domains of the modern world. Acceptance within the international community, with its many agencies and associations, depends on varying degrees of legal compliance. But unlike much of the Muslim world, many developed nations formulate and reform their legal codes within an intellectual and methodological framework that is free from the intensely restrictive parameters of religious doctrine, even if certain sensibilities still remain strong. In these instances, law is the product of representative government and subject to revision and reform at the will of public opinion. However, in Islamic thought, law must comply with the Will of the Lawgiver (God). Of course, Islam is hardly the sole operating force within Muslim societies, as cultural customs (e.g., tribal laws), among a host of other factors, play a decisive role in nearly all legal proceedings and judgments. In fact, there is much to be said about

the degree to which "Islam" is actually related to a host of economic, social, and political trends operating within such extremely complex human societies. A study by Michael Gilson, *Recognizing Islam: Religion and Society in the Modern Middle East*, has examined these very issues.⁵ Nevertheless, the justification of legal rulings in accordance with Islamic norms and parameters remains a contentious matter and one to which Muslim societies have always remained highly sensitive and attentive.

Formulations of Islamic law have been largely standardized for centuries, and while the potential elasticity of jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and range of opinions and ideas that jurists have produced as interpretive agents have been great and diverse, there are still formidable limits to such exercises. Reformist or liberal interpretations are easily undermined by pervasive, ossified, typically ahistorical, atomistic, and patriarchal treatments and conceptions of the sacred texts and their legal derivatives. The result is a highly restricted intellectual arena where the boundaries of creative thought are fiercely protected by claims of transcendence and divine authorship. Law, we must note, begins where theology leaves off. The former must operate within the parameters established by the latter, assuming the form of postulates in all subsequent discourse. There are striking differences in the sociopolitical implications of Ash'arite creedal postulates versus the creedal postulates formulated by traditionalist opponents of theology (*kalam*), the Atharis. But in both cases, the axiomatic dilemma remains the same. The intellectual results of Ash'arite creedal formulations are far more desirable and conducive to modern liberal aspirations than Athari creedal formulations. However, Ash'arite formulations still continue to impose highly restrictive boundaries in their present creedal form that inhibit the full potential of theological discourse.

While law has remained the primary focus for Muslim liberals and reformists, the significance of renewed, active theological discourse has not escaped the attention of all scholars. However, in virtually every instance, interest in theology has meant interest in Mu'tazilism, which was long ago deemed heretical and outside of the boundaries of Sunni Islam. Given that anti-theological sentiment is already a formidable barrier to be overcome, attempting to revive theological discourse via a school perceived to be a reprehensible

heresy is a rather dubious proposition. This interest in Mu'tazilite theology has been due, at least in part, to the widespread yet erroneous perception, even among Muslim intellectuals, that Ash'arism and traditionalist creedalism are synonymous. For example, the prominent Egyptian reformist and opponent of Islamist radicalism Muhammad Sa'id al-'Ashmawi (former chief justice of Egypt's Supreme Court) has bluntly and erroneously blamed Ash'arism for the ossification and degeneration of Islamic thought in his writings. Specifically, 'Ashmawi blames the ideas and doctrines disseminated by Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari (d. 935 CE) and Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111 CE), identifying both theologians by name. Characterized as representatives of the "traditionalist" opponents of the Mu'tazilites, 'Ashmawi argues that the ideas of al-Ash'ari and al-Ghazali destroyed (single-handedly it seems) the concepts of causality and free will in Islamic thought.⁶ He states: "With the loss of causality and free will, the Islamic mind closed, and Islam lost its vitality and potential for development; thereafter, Islam . . . slipped into degeneration."⁷ Such bold yet egregious claims demonstrate an alarming lack of knowledge about Ash'arism and Sunni theology (*kalam*). Such views are also indicative of reformist views of Ash'arism in general (e.g., Fazlur Rahman, Muhammad Arkoun, Fatima Mernissi, among others). The reforms that Ashmawi advocates call for "the abandonment of the al-Ash'ari and al-Ghazali doctrine" and "a revival of Islamic mind, ethics and human rights and an integration of these with the contemporary civilization."⁸ In the end, however, such fallacious assertions and problematic methods will have no Sunni credibility and may only aid those 'Ashmawi claims to oppose. Contrary to such allegations, Ash'arism, when actively engaged, contains tremendous potential for a vibrant and vigorous Islamic liberalism that can support the success of modern Muslim nation-states and foster further political, social, and economic development.

When we examine the Athari creed, we find that the real doctrine underlying the absolutist and authoritarian agenda of its proponents is not principally the issue of free will or causality, but the uncreated nature of the Qur'an. The Athari doctrine, unlike the Ash'arite articulation of the same position, proposes that the Arabic Qur'an (as it is written and read today) is the eternal and uncreated Speech of God existing prior to the creation of the universe and was therefore in no

way a participant in human history or temporal events. As the famous traditionalist Ahmed ibn Hanbal (d. 855 CE) is reported to have said: "He who maintains that our sounds (which render the Qur'an) and our recitation of the Qur'an are created, is a Jahmite (i.e. heretic or infidel), and he who does not declare all those people infidels is like them!"⁹⁹ The sociopolitical implication is that the Qur'an is the eternally binding blueprint for all societies and all times and conformity to the letter of all seventh-century Arabian revelations is a divine mandate. In other words, the Qur'an exists entirely outside of history (even in defiance of it). The specific dictates and regulations of the Qur'an are not in response to the events that occurred during the life of the Prophet Muhammad from 610 to 632 CE in the cities of Mecca and Medina, but rather the revelations anticipated them in light of preordained events and outcomes. Such dogma cannot sustain the onslaught of human reason, which is why rational contemplation of the sacred texts and the articles of belief (i.e., *kalam*) is designated by Atharis as a satanic heresy. The Athari view is furthermore forced to rely on exegetical gymnastics and spurious and often bizarre notions of abrogation to maintain its antihistorical readings. Drastic notions of abrogation actually figure prominently in radical Islamist treatises on the use of violence, such as Muhammad 'Abdel-Salam Faraj's *al-Faridah al-Gha'ibah*, considered to be the manifesto for Anwar Sadat's assassination in 1981. When radical Islamists achieve power, armed with the territorial jurisdiction and coercive force of the modern nation-state, the imposition of such rudimentary dogma upon deeply complex and illegible human societies inevitably fails and radical Islamist regimes quickly resort to brutal and violent means to bring about the utopian system they claim has been commanded by God. If they do not do so, they would, in their view, either be committing the grave sin of *shirk* (i.e., idolatry) or admitting in some way that God is incorrect, which of course He can never be (God is Perfect).

In creedal form, the Ash'arite doctrine is easily confused with the Athari traditionalist doctrine. However, the theological form reveals profound differences between the two with charges of infidelity and apostasy even coming into play. The Ash'arite doctrine of the uncreated Qur'an affirms an essential distinction between the linguistic manifestation (i.e., the Arabic letters and words of the text) or the "utterance" of the Speech of God, and the Speech itself, which is

unceasing and subsists in the Divine Essence (i.e., God's Attribute). The Speech of God is eternal and uncreated, but what takes the form of letters and sentences, whether written or spoken, or recorded in ink on pages, is necessarily contingent and temporal and therefore only a symbolic (but miraculous) manifestation of God's uncreated and eternal Speech. As the Ash'arite theologian al-Qushayri (d. 1074 CE), who wrote that the unceasing Speech of God "is not a sound" and "is neither Arabic, nor Syriac, nor Hebrew," has stated:

God's Speech [when manifested] in Arabic is called "a *qur'an*," in Syriac "an *injl*," and in Hebrew "a *taurat*"; but the Qur'an is also, in the strict sense, God's Speech and so too the *Taurat* and the *Injl*... that the Creator's Speech be called Qur'an, *Taurat*, and *Injl* does not imply multiplicity of His Speech, just as He is called "*Allah*" in Arabic, "*Izid*" in Persian, and "*Tanri*" in Turkish, but is One.¹⁰

To borrow the categories formulated by the Swiss linguist and founder of semiotics, Ferdinand De Saussure (d. 1913), a written or spoken word is a linguistic sign, consisting of both a *signifier* and a *signified*, existing within a temporal system of relationships that determines meaning (i.e., signification). Every linguistic sign (i.e., word) consists of a sound-image represented in written or spoken form by a signifier (e.g., "b-o-o-k") that then correlates to the signified, which is the object or concept assigned within that temporal and culturally bound system of relationships to that sound-image (e.g., sheets of paper bound together within covers).¹¹ In the Ash'arite view, the arrangement of linguistic signs or sound-images of the Arabic Qur'an represent the signifier (which is temporal and created), while the signified, the meaning conveyed by the Arabic signs (letters and words), is the uncreated Speech of God. As al-Shahrastani stated of al-Ash'ari's doctrine: "The sentences and words which are revealed through the tongues of angels to the prophets are signs of the eternal word: the sign itself is created and originated, but what is signified is eternal."¹² Saussure's synchronic approach to the study of language also proposes that every sign is fundamentally relational, culturally and historically bound, and therefore arbitrary.¹³ Meaning is furthermore predicated on differences in the form of binary oppositions, such as light and

dark, or life and death.¹⁴ As such, “while some may assume that good and evil name real, material conditions in the world, Saussure’s analysis of language forces [scholars] to ask whether good and evil exist prior to language or only within the binary relationships of terms in particular languages,” such as Arabic or Hebrew.¹⁵ The traditional science of Qur’anic studies (*‘Ulum al-Qur’an*) has long asserted the existence of variant readings of the Arabic text, typically numbering seven or ten (but sometimes more).¹⁶ The limitations or inadequacies of language have also occupied the attention of Islamic mysticism, often in the form of *tawil* or esoteric interpretations of the Qur’an. The divide between signifier and signified, although not articulated as such, thus appears to be a rather established notion in Islamic thought. The sociopolitical implications of the Ash’arite doctrine of the Qur’an are therefore highly significant.

The Pakistani modernist Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988) was fiercely critical of Ash’arism and heaped great blame on it for the stagnation of Islamic thought and the predominance of ossified, atomistic interpretations of the Qur’an. Despite the fallacy of such views, Rahman, making his case for reform, correctly emphasized the need for a cohesive, unified, and historical hermeneutic of the Qur’an. The Qur’an, he argued, must be understood as an integrated whole and not as a collection of individual, ahistorical verses. On this point, Ash’arite theological semiotics proposes that the Arabic utterance or manifestation of the uncreated Speech of God is necessarily relational. Signification is conveyed within a system of signs, including binary oppositions, and not in isolation (i.e., “atomistic” readings). The significance of this concept is amplified all the more by the absence of a fully developed Arabic literary language (including the script itself) prior to the emergence of Islam (i.e., the Qur’an). Diachronic approaches to the study of the Arabic language are thus highly limited. A synchronic, semiotic approach, on the other hand, provides a far more justified treatment of the text and need not rely on excessive post-Qur’anic traditions or notions of abrogation to sustain it. In addition, Ash’arite theological semiotics immediately historicizes the text. In other words, the linguistic manifestation (or incarnation) of God’s uncreated Speech occurred at particular historical moments between 610 and 632 CE in the language of the immediate recipients, the Arabs of the Hijaz. As the Qur’an states: “And if We made it (*ja’alnahu*)

in a language other than Arabic (*‘ajamiyyah*) then they would have said ‘Why are its verses not explained? A non-Arabic [message] and an Arab [Messenger]?’” (41:44).¹⁷ In another verse, God states to the Prophet: “And thus We inspired in you [Muhammad] an Arabic Qur’an to warn the Mother of Cities [i.e. Mecca]” (42:7).¹⁸ Muslim exegetes have always been interested in *asbab al-nuzul* (“the occasions of revelation”). However, the obvious historical dimensions of these materials have traditionally been subverted by the traditionalist belief that the events were preordained and thus largely irrelevant to human understandings of the text beyond the letter. But Ash‘arite theological semiotics proposes that the signs (letters and words) were originated in history. As al-Juwayni (d. 1085 CE) has stated: “Those who believe in the eternity of the Speech of the Exalted God and its subsistence in the essence of the Creator . . . and the impossibility of its separating from that to which it is attributed, will have no doubt at all about the impossibility of its being transposed.”¹⁹ If we further understand that language consists of not only words, grammar, syntax, and so forth, but idioms, hyperbole, simile, aesthetic phonetics (etc.), and that language can only reflect or communicate existing knowledge, and evolves on the basis of the acquisition of knowledge, then the potential sociopolitical implications become even clearer. Signification is culturally and temporally bound. The Qur’an not only addresses its seventh-century recipients in the particular language that they spoke, but it addresses the world in which they lived as well.

Of the countless binary oppositions found in the Qur’an, heaven and hell are among the most prominent. In the Qur’an, heaven is generally depicted as a lush garden with rivers of cool, fresh, flowing water, and an abundance of ripe fruits, delicious foods (e.g., meat), and even wine that does not intoxicate. The inhabitants of the garden live among pure and beautiful companions and recline on silk couches in the shade, enjoying perfect happiness without fear, anxiety, or suffering. Meanwhile, the Qur’an describes hell as a place of unrelenting heat, blazing fires, black smoke, and total despair, with only putrid, boiling hot water to drink, and bitter thorns to eat. It is inhabited by crowds of the most vile and wicked people, who dwell in shackles of iron, ashamed and humiliated, without any relief from these horrific conditions. Their flesh is not beautiful, but burnt, filthy, and blackened with smoke and ash. The Qur’anic imagery is more than simply

enticing or dramatic. It is calculated and catered to the original historical audience, the ancient Arabs living in the harsh and unforgiving deserts of Arabia. The oasis imagery of green gardens, clear and cool water, delicious foods, and shade from the sun (etc.), all suggest the temporal qualities (i.e., culturally bound) of the Qur'anic language. The same can clearly be said for the imagery of hell. Heaven and hell are not merely separate places, but antonyms that directly reference the harsh desert existence of the text's immediate historical audience. The meaning of one concept is amplified by the opposition of the other. Furthermore, the Qur'an's depiction of heaven would be far less alluring or meaningful for an audience living, for example, in the rainforests of Brazil, even if certain elements of the imagery do indeed resonate universally. As such, Ash'arite semiotics proposes that such textual imagery is originated and that it represents the culturally bound nature of the Arabic text. Furthermore, as Muslims themselves have often noted, the Qur'an alludes to this point with the verse: "For no soul knows what delights of the eye are kept hidden for them as a reward for what they used to do" (32:17).²⁰

Perhaps the most important binary opposition found in the Qur'an is the moral dichotomy of belief (*iman*) and unbelief (*kufi*).²¹ "For truly, those that do not believe (*kafaru*) follow falsehood," the Qur'an states, "and verily those who believe (*amanu*) follow the Truth from their Lord" (47:3).²² This dichotomy shapes the entire ethos of the Qur'an. But contrary to the general character of the discourse, the two designations are not at all abstractions. They are direct, historical (or literary) references to the supporters and opponents of the Prophet Muhammad in the Arabian cities of Mecca and Medina between 610 and 632 CE. As such, the conduct, behavior, and attitudes of both Muhammad's supporters and his enemies, and the Qur'anic responses to that conduct, have forever shaped Islamic thought and practice. These two designations also underwent a series of chronological expansions in correlation with events during the mission of the Prophet. Among the early revelations, the Qur'an lists several characteristics or virtues of the believers, such as thankfulness, patience, modesty, generosity, compassion, honesty, and faithfulness in acts of devotion, especially regular prayer and fasting. In opposition to these virtues are the characteristics or faults of the unbelievers, which include ungratefulness, arrogance, selfishness, greediness, backbiting,

violence, heedlessness, and stubbornness. The Qur'an then expands on these qualities through a series of responses to specific incidents in the Prophet's life. In Mecca, the unbelievers are the people that mocked and rejected the resurrection (the ancient Arabs thought the idea was absurd), committed female infanticide, abused slaves, orphans, and widows, and assigned daughters to God among a host of other "pagan" deities. Among the Meccan revelations we also find *Surat al-Kafirun*, which commands the believers to say to the unbelievers: "Oh unbelievers, I worship not what you worship, nor do you worship what I worship . . . to you your religion and to me mine" (109:1–3, 6).²³ Then in Medina (after the *hijra* in 622 CE), the unbelievers became the people that drove the believers from their homes (i.e. in Mecca), fought against them, and sought to destroy them because of their devotion to Islam. The designation is even expanded later to include a faction of Medinese Jews who sided with the Meccan animists against the Muslims. These shifts in designation initiate a series of relational repercussions in the text, most importantly the permission for the believers to fight the unbelievers (i.e., military jihad) and a host of Medinan verses about warfare, including the infamous "Verse of the Sword" (9:5). These changes are fundamentally relational. The existence of fighting believers presupposes and relies on the relational opposition of fighting unbelievers. In the absence of that correlation, the dichotomy reverts to its prior (i.e., Meccan) form or undergoes further alteration based on new circumstances (i.e., a different opposition). The fighting believer is not perpetual, but exists only alongside the existence of its binary opposition, the fighting unbeliever. As the Qur'an attests in a Medinan surah: "And if the enemy inclines toward peace, then incline toward peace as well" (8:61).²⁴ Within this synchronic semiotic system, Qur'anic imperatives are suspended in the absence of the temporal circumstances that inspired them. Such a theological preposition would have profound effects on how Muslim scholars think about such subjects as the veiling of women, adoption, and apostasy, among many others.

Despite the fact that jurisprudence emerged as the central domain of Islamic thought, the Qur'an contains surprisingly little legal content. Only around 5 percent of the Qur'an's verses deal with legal issues. However, the Qur'an's sparse laws, especially the *hudud* punishments, have proven to be a formidable obstacle and contentious

issue in the political arena. Take, for instance, the *hudud* punishment for theft. The Qur'an states: "And as for the male and female thief, cut off their hands as a punishment for their crime from God" (5:38).²⁵ Admittedly, the Qur'an goes on to state that if the thief repents and amends his or her conduct, he or she can avoid this punishment (5:39). However, Islamist regimes have been quick to carry out such penalties to prove their Islamic "credentials." Even a close ally of the United States, the Wahhabite kingdom of Saudi Arabia, carries out such penalties on a regular basis.²⁶ These amputations and other such punishments greatly offend Western sensibilities and most in the international community would consider them a violation of human rights. In the United States, amputation of the hand would be considered "cruel and unusual punishment" and therefore illegal. Such laws would also exclude a country (such as Turkey) from membership in the European Union, which also prohibits the death penalty for its member states. The dilemma then becomes quite serious. It is well known, even among Athari scholars such as Ibn Kathir, that amputation of the hand was a punishment for theft in Arabia before the time of the Prophet. The Qur'an never introduced the practice, but it did sanction it as an existing Arab custom, as it did with a number of other customs (e.g., polygamy). The severity of the punishment is also hardly unique among ancient cultures either, where punishments for theft ranged from labor and lashes, to enslavement, and even to execution. The historicizing power of Ash'arite semiotics thus proposes that signification is temporal and therefore relative to existing knowledge and custom. Recognizing that amputation of the hand was an existing *jahili* Arab custom, the Qur'anic verse could be read as a sanction or permission for the Arabs to continue to punish thieves as they saw fit for their time and circumstances, while also notably giving the offender a way to avoid that penalty (see 5:39). The assumption that the punishment is a divine mandate for all times and peoples thus becomes highly tenuous.

Higher Criticism and Religious Liberalism

Following the Age of Enlightenment, the emergence of modern liberal societies in Christian Western Europe and its colonies coincided with a new approach to the study of the Biblical text. Beginning in

the eighteenth century, higher criticism, as it is known, employed a range of critical historical methods to analyze the origins, sources, structural forms, and evolution of the Biblical text in a manner once reserved exclusively for other less revered or “profane” works. The narratives and events described in the Bible were subjected to (among other things) rational, scientific inquiry and rigorous comparisons to the latest archeological data. The result was a host of dramatic new insights into our understanding of the Bible. For many Christians, the work of these scholars and scientists was hardly something to be applauded. On the contrary, it was viewed by some as sheer blasphemy and a malicious conspiracy against religion, specifically Christianity. For others, however, historical and literary criticism provided a greater, more intellectually fulfilling understanding of religion that was open to new ideas and ways of being religious in the modern world. The findings of these scholars continue to cast considerable doubt on the historicity of many of the narratives, people, and events contained in the corpus of the Biblical text and point to a number of glaring problems for scriptural literalists. For instance, striking parallels between Biblical narratives and those of other ancient Near Eastern cultures reveal that many elements of the text are not at all unique and seem to reflect common motifs and appropriations from other cultures and religions traditionally deemed “false” or “pagan.”

When scholars think about a historical and literary analysis of the Bible, the implications are generally understood purely within a Christian or Jewish context. What is forgotten, however, is the amount of material shared by Muslims with the other two Abrahamic traditions. For instance, if scholars question the historicity of the Exodus story and the historical existence of the great prophet Moses, concluding that no such figure ever existed, then the implications for Muslims are indeed considerable. Of course, even today there are millions of American Christians who believe that the world was created in six days and existed for only six thousand years, in open and irrational defiance of all reputable scientific evidence. Thus, Muslims too can certainly maintain traditional readings of the Qur’an, including the stories of Moses, regardless of what scholars and scientists conclude. But the issue at hand nevertheless remains. Liberal Jewish and Christian thinkers have successfully reconciled the findings of higher criticism through a distinctly different approach to their sacred

scriptures. Liberal Christians, for instance, often emphasize a theology focused on the person of Christ and reduce the New Testament to the product of sincere yet fallible human beings attempting to convey their belief in the profound significance of Jesus and his teachings within the circumstances of their own times and cultures. The Qur'an, however, is distinctly different for Muslims than the Bible is for Christians. It is the literal, *dictated* Word of God (in the first person), revealed through one man, the Prophet Muhammad, and guarded and preserved by divine decree. To suggest that any of the content of the Qur'an comes from any other source than God, or that the text evolved, that it contains errors of some sort, or even that it is the word of the Prophet Muhammad (i.e., not Allah) is beyond all bounds. It is to call the entire religion into question. But a vigorous Islamic liberalism must be able to cope with these sorts of challenges and reconcile modern academic scholarship with Islamic convictions. Otherwise, Muslims are left predisposed to an anti-intellectual textualism that lends itself to irrationality, "fundamentalism," and extremism. On this point, Ash'arite semiotics offers a theoretical solution to the problem of higher criticism for Islamic thought.

The Qur'an mentions twenty-five biblical prophets by name,²⁷ in addition to several holy persons²⁸ (some of which are biblical), and three nonbiblical prophets,²⁹ in addition to Muhammad. Traditional readings of the Qur'an, supported by numerous prophetic traditions (*ahadith*), have long promoted the view that the stories of the prophets in the Qur'an are literal and deeply important events in human history, or, at the very least, meaningful stories about real historical personalities who were literally messengers of God like Muhammad. Such narratives are sporadic and fragmented throughout the text, but are still a near constant presence. The Qur'an, however, never relates any of these narratives in either a linear chronology or as a clear sequence of events within a broader framework of human history, although such a sequence has been constructed (with some difficulty) by various Muslim scholars (e.g., Ibn Kathir). It is well known, for instance, that the Qur'an does not begin with the words "in the beginning" (Gen. 1:1) as the Torah does, or with a birth like the Gospels. Rather, the prophetic narratives appear as no more than a peripheral presence to the core content and imperatives of the text, being employed only as a means of illustration and reinforcement of the central points of

a particular chapter or verse. This is a striking and unique quality of the Qur'an, which contrasts deeply with the narratives and literary structure of the Bible. The narratives in the Qur'an do not function as a historical record or as a way of conveying the history of a covenant community. Instead they act as a communication device that is, in effect, no different than the human language (i.e., Arabic) that conveys the narrative. As the Qur'an states: "We relate unto you [Muhammad] the best of stories in what We reveal to you from this Qur'an" (12:3).³⁰ It also states: "God has revealed the best of tales in a Book consistent within itself, pairing its statements" (39:23).³¹ This latter verse is particularly interesting given that it seems to allude to the synchronicity of the text and its numerous binary oppositions.

Ash'arite semiotics proposes that the prophetic narratives are communication devices that reflect temporal reference points and draw from the storytelling traditions of Arabia's oral societies. The sources of these narratives, and the Qur'anic modifications to them, tell us much about their significance within the relational system of the Arabic text. Under this hermeneutical approach, the narratives of the prophets contained in the Qur'an, whether those of Abraham, Moses, or Jesus, are not read as a documentation of a particular set of historical events acknowledged as absolute truth alongside such fundamental precepts as the unity of God (e.g., *al-tawhid*), even though such events may have hypothetically taken place and may have even been identical to the Qur'anic narrative to the smallest detail. Rather, the Qur'an employs a set of existing religious ideas, themes, and concepts, or what some scholars refer to as an existing body of "religious knowledge," while simultaneously extracting and modifying certain elements necessary to successfully transfer these characters and traditional narratives into the service of the text and reinforce its fundamental precepts (e.g., *al-tawhid*). Note, for instance, that there are three core historical audiences addressed by the Qur'an other than the Muslims themselves; the animist Arabs (i.e., pagans), the Jews (especially in Medina), and the Christians. The prophetic narratives in the Qur'an also come in three types: those of pre-Islamic Arabian origin (e.g., Hud, Saleh, Shu'aib, Luqman), Jewish origin (e.g., Moses, David, Solomon), and Christian origin (e.g., the sleepers in the cave, Mary, Zachariah, John, Jesus). All of these narratives and characters are easily understood and communicate certain ideas and understandings to

their intended audiences. However, all of them have been employed in the service of the Qur'an's message, rather than existing independently for the sake of documentation or any other purpose. Based on this theological hermeneutic of the Qur'an, the findings of higher criticism should remain open to intellectual debate and investigation. They do not, in the end, threaten the integrity of the revealed text and may thus be accepted.

Conclusion

The material presented in this chapter is entirely theoretical. If a renewed Ash'arite theological discourse does take place, it would not necessarily play out in the manner that I have described here. However, the goal of this scholarly exercise was to demonstrate what active theological discourse is capable of producing, especially as a basis for a vigorous Islamic liberalism. In that, the reader may judge my success. The theological formulations presented here are all firmly grounded in Ash'arite thought, and not the doctrines of theological schools long ago deemed heretical by Sunni *ulama*. At the same time, these theological formulations demonstrate a profound ability to respond to the challenges of modern governance and reconcile the modern nation-state with traditional Sunni beliefs and practices. The challenge that proponents of "public religion," such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, generally present to the world is how to reconcile the needs and complexities of the modern nation-state with the formidable parameters that religions create for human societies. Sociopolitical reform must, in these instances, be religiously justified in order to move forward without unmanageable interference and opposition from Islamists or other proponents of public religion. As I have argued, Ash'arite theology offers an "orthodox" medium for such reforms to take place.

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CONCLUSION

The Revival of *Kalam*?

The potential of theology (*kalam*) as the basis for a vigorous Islamic liberalism is tantalizing. But theoretical exercises and historical case studies, like that of al-Tilmisani, tell us relatively little about everyday realities and the prospects for the revival of theology in the contemporary Muslim world. Sunni Islam has continued for some five centuries without active theological discourse, and there appears to be little urgency to reverse this trend. In fact, outside of certain intellectual circles, relatively few Muslims even know the meaning of the term *'ilm al-kalam*. Broadly speaking, the prospects for the revival of theology seem unlikely at the present time. However, a reversal of this trend is possible under certain conditions.

While no centralized institution in charge of “orthodoxy” exists in Sunni Islam, all beliefs and practices are subject to critical evaluation in light of the sacred texts and the discernment of the *ulama*. Ultimately, it is the consensus (*ijma*) of the scholars and the community at large that determines what is (or is not) Sunni orthodoxy. As such, there are two forms of theology that can be pursued without formidable (perhaps impossible) opposition, namely Ash‘arism and Maturidism. As we have already discussed, both schools are already recognized as “orthodox.” However, Maturidism has little influence or significance outside of Hanafite circles and has contributed relatively little to the corpus of theological scholarship compared to Ash‘arism. Reformists, as we have already noted, have thus far devoted their attention to Mu‘tazilism, and even *falsafah* (philosophy). In some

instances, reformists, such as the noted South African liberal intellectual Farid Esack have gone outside of Islam altogether and attempted to import outside theological traditions. As I demonstrated in chapter six, these methods appear highly unnecessary and I fail to see the advantage of such choices.

In his book *Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism*, Esack attempts to construct an Islamic liberation theology through a progressive and inclusive (even critical) reading of the Qur'an in response to the unique historical context of the antiapartheid struggle in late-twentieth-century South Africa. He states: "I argue for the freedom to rethink the meanings and use of scripture in a racially divided, economically exploitative and patriarchal society and to forge hermeneutical keys that will enable us to read the text in such a way as to advance the liberation of all people."¹ Esack's "hermeneutical keys" carry special relevance for a society "characterized by injustice, division and exploitation," and include *taqwa*, *tawhid*, *al-mustad'afun* (the oppressed on the earth), *'adl*, and *jihad*, which he defines as "struggle and praxis."² Esack's reading of the Qur'an, as we might expect, emphasizes the principle of progressive revelation, the significance of *asbab al-nuzul* (the contextual occasions of revelation), affirms the idea of the Qur'an as a single cohesive text, encourages in-depth linguistic analysis, and challenges a number of doctrinal or dogmatic assumptions of Sunni orthodoxy. As such, Esack's work echoes the primary emphases of other liberal or progressive Muslim scholars such as the late Fazlur Rahman or Amina Wadud, but offers a far more comprehensive and authoritative analysis than Wadud, and remains more closely grounded in traditional Islamic thought than Rahman, although with some nevertheless radical conclusions, particularly with regards to women.

Esack's knowledge of the Qur'an, its chief exegetes (e.g., al-Tabari, Rida), post-Qur'anic sources (e.g., *sirah* and Hadith), and the Arabic language are impressive as he traverses (and does not shy away as some apologists do) a number of key verses and passages that are relevant (both in support and in opposition) to his primary agenda. However, his position does require us to distance ourselves from orthodoxy to a degree that severely limits the significance of his work outside of progressive and intellectual circles (which are small). More specifically, whenever one attempts to emphasize *asbab al-nuzul*, or to

contextualize Qur'anic verses in the historical circumstances of seventh-century Mecca and Medina, or to talk about "universals" versus "particulars," one must necessarily address or reconcile with orthodox Sunni theology, principally the doctrine of the uncreated nature of the Qur'an. Esack does not succeed on this point and thus opens himself up to charges of heresy and Mu'tazilism (i.e., createdness of the Qur'an). But most of all, this problem is amplified by Esack's incorporation of the works of several important scholars of Christian liberation theology, such as Gustavo Gutierrez, who developed their controversial theologies amongst the sociopolitical and economic turmoil of Catholic South America. As Esack himself admits, employing the "Other" in the construction of a new Islamic theology severely damages the credibility of his efforts among the majority of Sunni Muslims.

Like Esack, the prominent Egyptian philosopher Hasan Hanafi has sought a radical reconstruction of Islamic thought through the formulation of an Islamic liberation theology.³ Hanafi, who was affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood in his youth, received his doctorate in philosophy at the Sorbonne in 1966 and currently serves as the chair of the Philosophy Department at Cairo University.⁴ Since beginning his academic career, Hanafi has emerged as a leading Arab critic of both Islamism and Western secularism and a proponent of what he describes as the "Islamic Left" (*al-Yasar al-Islami*). His views are highly eclectic and consist of an amalgamation of phenomenology, rationalism, social democracy, critical theory, and Sufism.⁵ Hanafi's tone is also revolutionary. His primary research is focused on the concept of *turath*, usually translated into English as "heritage." For Hanafi, history is a cumulative repository of knowledge and experience that shapes human values, behavior, and psyches in the present, therefore Arab Muslims dwell and operate within their *turath*.⁶ Or as he defines it: "A psychological storehouse for the masses and the theoretical foundation for the structure of reality."⁷ In his view, the current decline of Arab and Muslim societies is the product of a destructive theoretical alteration in the Muslims' conception of the world that began in the twelfth century (CE) and continues to inhibit Muslim creativity and reform efforts today. "The people do not act on the basis of preaching," he states, but by "changing their conception of the world."⁸ Therefore, in order for Muslims to understand their

historical situation in a way that enables them to act and resolve the problems facing them, they must formulate a new theory (or theology) of action.⁹ Like the erroneous claims of Fazlur Rahman, the culprit in Hanafi's scheme is none other than Ash'arism. In Hanafi's view, the tyranny of Ash'arite ontology and epistemology, brought to its ultimate victory by the intellectual repertoire of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, imposed antirational authoritarian control over the *shari'ah* in service of the ruling classes with devastating and far reaching results.¹⁰ Hanafi's scheme is fraught with familiar problems that we have identified elsewhere in this analysis. Like Rahman, Arkoun, Ashmawi, and others, Hanafi conflates the Ash'arites with the Atharis and follows the same flawed narrative of the "triumph" of Ash'arism in Sunni Islam. The account of the history of Sunni theology and the Athari movement presented in this book refutes this scheme. Furthermore, the liberation theology Hanafi proposes, like Esack, relies heavily (if not entirely) on outside and "heterodox" sources, namely Marxism and Mu'tazilism (among others). In my view, theology already faces significant opposition from the outset; therefore any attempt at a revival of theology must be pursued through one of the two existing Sunni schools that possess orthodox credentials in order for it to have any credibility among Muslims at all. Otherwise such efforts are almost certainly doomed to failure.

One obvious means of reintroducing *kalam* is through changes in the curriculum of major institutions of Islamic learning, such as the venerable al-Azhar in Cairo. However, as this study of Islamism and contemporary Islamic thought has shown, the most notable Muslim leaders and activists of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have generally not come from among the *ulama*, but from the "laity." 'Umar al-Tilmisani was a lawyer, Abu 'Ala Mawdudi a journalist, Sayyid Qutb a writer and educator, Hasan al-Banna a primary school teacher, Ayman al-Zawahiri a pediatrician, and so on. These are not figures with formal religious education in the sciences of *usul al-fiqh*, *'ilm al-hadith*, or *usul al-din*, from a traditional institution of learning like al-Azhar or the Qarrawiyyin in Fez. As such, while the appeal of certain gifted and charismatic *ulama* should never be overlooked, the revival of theology may have better success with televised theological debates and discussions on satellite television (e.g., al-Jazeera), especially during Ramadan, rather than new

madrasa curricula. The internet also offers interesting possibilities for the propagation of religious ideas and schools of thought, as radical Islamists such as al-Zawahiri and Bin Laden have already demonstrated. Indeed, the online world has proved to be a fruitful and volatile place for religious ideas to be transmitted, especially to Muslim youth. Yet, many of the places where radical Islamism is most active are poverty stricken, like Afghanistan, where neither the technological resources nor proper education system exist beyond the most rudimentary memorization camps. The complexity of theology also poses some problems, because it requires a trained intellect to comprehend the material insofar as it exists in the classical texts. The subtleties of Ash'arite doctrine and proofs are generally beyond many at the present moment, especially given the high illiteracy rates in parts of the Muslim world (e.g., Afghanistan, Pakistan). Improvements in education and economic development must precede indigenous theological revival. As such, the revival of theology may be best suited to occur in regions where such conditions already exist, perhaps among the Sunni Muslim Diaspora in the West, Turkey, South East Asia, or in the wealthy Sunni Gulf states. But that does not at all preclude the possibility of its resurgence elsewhere in the Muslim world.

In Indonesia, the late Nurcholish Madjid (d. 2005) was influenced by the ideas of the aforementioned Egyptian Leftist philosopher Hasan Hanafi and Indonesian Neo-Mu'tazilite Harun Nasution (d. 1998). Madjid rebuked some of the Mu'tazilite tendencies of his reformist colleagues and affirmed the potential of certain aspects of Ash'arism as a basis for reform. Madjid was a student of Fazlur Rahman at the University of Chicago, but clearly did not share his teacher's disdain for the Ash'arites. Madjid even argued that the Ash'arite understanding of *kasb* ("acquisition") paralleled the Protestant work ethic.¹¹ In *kalam*, Madjid ultimately saw a means to resolve the serious sociopolitical dilemmas of modern national development, an approach that he appropriately called the "Theology of Development."¹² Madjid furthermore argued that Muslims should allow any ideas, however unconventional, to be expressed freely and to be received with an open mind.¹³ Yet, in putting this into practice, Madjid, like Esack, borrowed from the work of a Christian theologian Harvey Cox by employing his concept of secularization (later rephrased by Madjid as "desacralization") in order to differentiate between transcendent

and temporal values.¹⁴ This seems to undermine the Sunni credibility of his approach. Madjid's aspirations may have been better served by drawing from the work of the Egyptian Azhar 'alim, 'Ali 'Abd al-Raziq (d. 1966). However, 'Abd al-Raziq's work, namely his treatise *al-Islam wa Usul al-Hukm* (1925), is already a source of considerable controversy for its secular stance. Meanwhile, like Rahman and other reformists who have failed to distinguish between Athari creedalism and Ash'arism, Harun Nasution, Madjid's teacher at the State Institute for Islamic Studies, continued to denounce Ash'arism as a source of fatalism, decadence, and stagnation. Generally speaking, as Richard Martin and Mark R. Woodward have noted, "the [reformist] thinkers of Indonesia appear to be closer to historical Mutazili positions than to historical traditionalist [i.e., Ash'arite or Maturidite] positions."¹⁵ Such heterodox tendencies bring with them serious vulnerabilities to reform efforts. The perception of strong syncretic strains within Indonesian Islam also persists (whether justified or not) and may jeopardize the credibility of serious reformist efforts there.

Despite the resources at their disposal, several oil-rich nations in the Gulf, most notably Saudi Arabia, are dominated by the most formidable Athari sect of contemporary Islam, Wahhabism, where the realm of the "unthinkable" is arguably at its strongest. There was actually a time many decades ago when the ultra-conservative kingdom, flush with new oil wealth, was liberalizing. King Faisal (d. 1975) oversaw many dramatic reforms during his reign aimed at modernizing the kingdom, which included the abolition of slavery, education for women, and the introduction of television broadcasts.¹⁶ After his assassination, his less ambitious successor King Khalid (d. 1982) continued the transformation of Saudi society. But on November 20, 1979, hundreds of armed Wahhabite militants, offended by the radical transformation and "sinful" conduct of the Saudi state, occupied Islam's holiest site, the Grand Mosque in Mecca, and proclaimed one of their leaders to be the long-awaited redeemer, the *Mahdi*. The bloody rebellion was ultimately crushed by Saudi and French security forces over a span of two weeks, but the long-standing impact of the event was the absorption of the ultra-conservative religious establishment by the state for its own survival. Since that time, Saudi Arabia has been wary of straying from Wahhabite orthodoxy.

In Turkey, Maturidism is ostensibly dominant in creedal form as a remnant of the Ottomans, but the secular ideology of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (d. 1938), or “Kemalism,” reigns supreme and continues to aggressively suppress religious activism, especially in state institutions (including universities and libraries). Lingering historical animosity toward the Turks also remains strong in parts of the Middle East (e.g., Egypt). It is not uncommon to hear Arabs in the Middle East dismiss Turks as being Muslim “only by name.” However, the influential Fethullah Gülen movement may hold some promise in the area of theology, especially when we consider the influence that its education networks have beyond Turkey in the Balkans and Central Asia.¹⁷ Gülen is not a theologian, but his praise of the classical orthodox Sunni theologians (both Ash‘arite and Maturidite) and pronounced emphasis on the importance of reason in Islamic hermeneutics may prove to be fertile ground for *kalam* (presumably Maturidite) one day. For example, Gülen has written:

Under the conception of religion that has developed in the West, knowing and believing are considered as different things. In Islam, however, they complement each other. The Qur‘an insists that everyone use his or her mental faculties (e.g. thinking, reasoning, reflecting, pondering, criticizing, evaluating, etc.).¹⁸

Gülen then goes on to denounce Athari “dogmatism,” which he appropriately calls “Zahirism” (from *al-zahir*, “the apparent”), and identifies scholars such as Ibn Hazm, Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, Ibn Kathir, and the Wahhabites of Saudi Arabia with it.

The significant number of Muslim intellectuals and scholars living amongst the Diaspora in the West may hold the best hope for the revival of theology of all. However, the Diaspora community must overcome major barriers of both language and authenticity. The Sudanese-American reformist and student of Mahmud Muhammad Taha (d. 1985) ‘Abdullahi Ahmad an-Na‘im has responded to these challenges by making his works available in multiple languages, including Arabic, Farsi, Turkish, Urdu, and Indonesian, and disseminating them to Muslim audiences around the world for free over the

internet. Such strategies allow his ideas to avoid the puritanical state censorship of countries like Saudi Arabia (assuming internet censors can be subverted) and the financial burdens of publication and distribution, as well as the threat of modern day book burnings. However, in terms of the question of authenticity, an-Na'im still faces an uphill battle. The ideas of his late teacher (for those few even aware of him) are generally considered to be heretical and outside the parameters of Sunni Islam.

In his study *Toward an Islamic Reformation*, an-Na'im makes it clear that Mahmoud Taha's unique theological approach, described as "the evolutionary principle of *Ustadh* Mahmoud," is the basis for his reformist methodology.¹⁹ As such, he openly admits that "however coherent and effective this approach may be, it still has to face the question of practical acceptability."²⁰ Taha related his unique views in a book entitled *The Second Message of Islam*, which was published in Sudan in 1967.²¹ In it, he argued that the Meccan surahs of the Qur'an represent "true" and universal Islam, which is egalitarian, nonviolent, and humanist in nature. However, the people of Arabia were unwillingly and unprepared to accept this message from the Prophet at that time. This prompted the *hijra* in 622 CE and the revelation of the Medinan surahs of the Qur'an over the next ten years. These later Medinan surahs imparted a temporary, historically bound, legalistic form of Islam that has since remained in place until humanity is prepared to receive the true Meccan message of Islam again. According to Taha, humanity has finally evolved enough to accept the true Islam contained in the Meccan surahs, therefore the *shari'ah*-based orthodoxy of traditional Sunni Islam need no longer apply. Obviously such views are heterodox and radical in many ways. Therefore an-Na'im has rightly concluded that "the prospect of wide acceptance and implementation of *Ustadh* Mahmoud's evolutionary principle by the majority of Muslims in the near future does not seem promising."²²

The issue of language and global accessibility brings us to another important point. The success of any attempt at theological revival will depend on the ability of its proponents to win acceptance and credibility across a far reaching and diverse geographical area. This requires theological studies to be produced in a range of languages,

especially the Arabic language. Despite the wide number of languages spoken by Muslims around the world, Arabic still remains the principal language of Islamic scholarship and widely studied as the language of the Qur'an and Hadith. More than 80 percent of the global Muslim population is non-Arab and Islamic ideals stress the trans-ethnic universalism of the religion. But acceptance in the Arab world still remains a kind of litmus test for Islamic thought. For instance, while Egyptian thinkers such as Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Sayyid Qutb, and Hasan al-Banna are widely known among Muslims in far away Indonesia, I am unaware of any Indonesian Muslim scholars that are studied in Egypt or the broader Arab world on any significant level. Furthermore, hundreds of students from countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia travel to Egypt every year to study Islam at al-Azhar. Arab students do not travel to South East Asia to study Islam, unless they are anthropologists. As such, what is rejected in Cairo, Damascus, and Fez may struggle to blossom into a global Islamic movement, even if it finds an audience in Jakarta, Istanbul, or Chicago.

There is currently an interesting, albeit unconventional, effort underway among a small group of Muslim scholars, mostly from the Arab world, who oppose "Salafi-Wahhabism" and seek to revive traditional Sunnism. These new "traditionalists" emphasize the unbroken lineage of their teachings over the centuries from scholar to scholar (similar to an *isnad* or *silsilah*) and utilize a range of new media platforms to make classical Sunnism relevant and accessible to contemporary Muslims. One product of this movement is a website called *Marifah* ("Knowledge").²³ The *Marifah* website is dedicated to reviving tradition Sunni religious sciences, including *'ilm al-kalam*, by making a range of treatises available online. As the description of the site explains:

The website staff of marifah.net comprises a group of Muslim students and professionals who have decided to dedicate their time and money to distributing the teachings of the scholars of Islam through the medium of the internet. Having recognized the shortage of material from classical and contemporary orthodox Sunni scholars on the internet, a need to make available such matter in English was apparent. The goal of our site is to address that very problem.

Among the excellent texts and translations accessible through *Marifah* are Taqi al-Din al-Subki's (d. 1355 CE) "The Importance of *Ilm al-Kalam*," in which the famous Ash'arite scholar of Cairo asserts that: "It was obligatory that there be among the people, one by whom God guards the beliefs of His righteous servants [i.e., theologians] and vigorously repels the doubts of the heretics. Indeed, his reward is greater than the reward of the mujahid fighter by far."²⁴ Other materials on *Marifah* include Najmuddin al-Nasafi's "The Nasafi Creed," Ibn Hajar al-Haytami's "On Allah's Speech," and even Ibn al-Jawzi's aforementioned rebuke of anthropomorphist tendencies among the Hanbalites (see chapter two). However, the most notable material offered (or linked) by *Marifah* may be the writings and multimedia produced by contemporary Sunni thinkers, such as the Ash'arite scholars Shaykh Muhammad ibn Yahya an-Ninowy and Shaykh Sa'id ibn 'Abdul Latif Foudah, who I referred to during our discussion of the Maturidites in chapter one.

Shaykh Muhammad ibn Yahya an-Ninowy was born in Aleppo, Syria, to a family of sayyeds (descendents of the Prophet Muhammad) in 1969.²⁵ An-Ninowy later attended al-Azhar University in Cairo, where he studied under the Faculty of Usul al-Din and later studied with scholars in Syria, the Hijaz (Saudi Arabia), Morocco, Sudan, and Jordan, receiving *ijaza* (certification) in many classical Sunni texts.²⁶ He is known among his followers for his mastery of Hadith, Shafi'i and Hanafi *fiqh*, Sufism (*tasawwuf*), and his skills as a *mutakallim*. An-Ninowy has also led mosques in both the United States and Great Britain for certain periods. In his sermons and lectures, which appear on YouTube and various other forms of new media, Shaykh an-Ninowy employs a distinctly theological dialectic and engages his audiences in a manner reminiscent of the Socratic method. During a series of lectures given at a mosque in Great Britain in 2006 on the topic of the *'aqidah al-Tahawiyyah*, he stated:

Imam al-Tahawi came in a time, around the third century A.H., in which people started coming up with all kinds of ideas... new sects started coming up... So the *ulama* of Islam, they dedicated themselves to preserve the knowledge that was passed onto

them...Among those scholars (*ulama*) of *Usul* (i.e. principles of belief)...was Imam Abu'l-Hasan al-Ashari...Matters of *aqidah* are matters of belief. What are you supposed to believe? Why do you believe? What are the Attributes of God?... What are the things that maintain one's Islam, and what are the things that negate one's Islam?...The articles of *aqidah* are the articles of faith...When you talk to a Muslim, textual proofs are enough...But when you talk to others...they want you to give them an intellectual proof. As a rule, the textual proof will never contradict the intellect...*Ilm al-tawhid* (i.e. theology) is obligatory upon every Muslim; upon every accountable person.²⁷

An-Ninowy then reminds the audience that all of the prophets came with the same message of *tawhid*, professing the absolute unique transcendence of God. But in time, people began to anthropomorphize God: "Many people today, unfortunately...still worship a superman; they call him 'God.'" An-Ninowy clarifies his use of the term "superman" by explaining: "A human being that has super powers, that lives in the seventh heaven, sits on a chair, comes and goes, he has a beard, and he lives above the clouds...this is the essence of *kufr* (unbelief); believing in this will only lead to *kufr*, nothing else." An-Ninowy then questions the men assembled in front of him in the mosque, guiding them to a "proper" understanding of the Sunni articles of belief. He asks them: "Why can't God resemble His creation?" No one answers. So he asks again, saying repeatedly: "Why not?" Finally he answers the question himself. The Creator and His creation are fundamentally different (indicated by the use of two different words) and cannot have the same attributes. God affirms this by telling the believers in the Qur'an that there is nothing like Him. "He does not resemble a human being," an-Ninowy asserts. That which is created is imperfect by nature. Only God, the Uncreated One, is perfect and above the limitations of bodies and matter. An-Ninowy then continues his lecture by explaining another article of belief. He asks his audience: "How about the place?" By "place" he refers to whether or not God exists in a spatial locality, likely with regards to the beatific vision (see chapter one). He again uses guided questioning. "They say God is in the seventh heaven," he says, "but where was God before the creation of the seventh heaven?"

The audience quietly mumbles, but does not answer. Unsatisfied, an-Ninowy continues with more questions:

Don't we believe that the seventh heaven is a creation? The seventh heaven is a creation by definition, right? ... So there was a time when the seventh heaven was not created, correct? So where was God then? Who needs a place to exist, dear brothers and sisters? You do! I do! ... Masses, creations need a place to exist ... A Creator is not in need of a place to exist; a Creator creates the place for others to exist ... God existed and nothing else existed; nothing! No time; no place; no space; no planets; no universe ... absolutely nothing ... Does He need a place to exist? Who has needs? ... Can you do without air? No ... Need means you are dependent, you are deficient ... God is not in need of anything, and everything is in need of Him.

After continuing for some time, elucidating the other articles of belief, an-Ninowy finally concludes his lecture by encouraging the congregation to ask all manner of questions regarding God and the beliefs of Islam. He says to them: "It's very important that we draw questions, whatever question that comes to your mind. Don't be shy because this is the time to ask questions about the belief. Every question has an answer in Islam; no doubt." The men seem to respond with enthusiastic approval. Perhaps in Shaykh an-Ninowy we see an orthodox Sunni theologian at work, giving us a sense of what the great centers of Islamic learning may have hosted so many centuries ago. His invitation to question the articles of belief would certainly be heretical, perhaps unthinkable, among the Atharis with their staunch resistance to intellectual inquiry and invocations of *bila kayf* ("without asking how"). Indeed, Shaykh an-Ninowy has become a popular target for slander and attacks by anonymous internet posters on popular Athari or "Salafi" forums and websites.

The second scholar Shaykh Sa'id ibn 'Abdul Latif Foudah was born in Haifa, Palestine, in 1967 and his family moved to Amman, Jordan, during his youth where he still resides today.²⁸ Foudah is a scholar of the Shafi'i *maddhab* in law, as were most of the classical theologians of the Ash'arite school. He was also trained in the sciences of *tafsir*, *tajwid*, *tasawwuf*, and apparently *kalam*, under scholars throughout

the Middle East, including the chief Mufti of Jordan Shaykh Nuh al-Qudah, the chief Mufti of Egypt Shaykh ‘Ali Guma’a, and Shaykh Ahmad al-Jamal of the Shadhiliyya *tariqa* in Jordan, among many others.²⁹ Foudah has also studied electrical engineering and is fluent in Arabic, English, and Italian. Among his numerous writings, which are available on *Marifah* and other websites (e.g., al-Razi.net), are expositions of Ash‘arite theology and systematic refutations of Athari (“Salafist” or “Wahhabite”) beliefs and practices, including the writings of Ibn Taymiyyah. In a commentary written by Foudah on the creed of al-Tahawi (*al-aqidah al-Tahawiyyah*), he criticizes the late Athari-Wahhabite scholar and former Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia Abdul-Aziz ibn Baz (d. 1999) for an erroneous critique of the “people of *kalam*.” Foudah asserts: “The sole intention of Shaykh Ibn Baz . . . was to oppose the scholars of *kalam*, even if with falsehood.”³⁰ Elsewhere in his commentary, Foudah asserts the vital importance of studying the articles of belief in Islam, stating: “*Aqidah* is sought after for itself, not only because it is a condition for the validity of actions. Even if an action is not obligatory, *aqidah* is still necessary, for it is the foundation of everything.”³¹ In another treatise entitled “Critiquing A Critique,” Foudah refutes Ibn Taymiyyah’s claims that the study of logic is forbidden in Islam and defends Abu Hamid al-Ghazali’s statement that logic is the basis of all sciences. “This itself is a type of fallacious reasoning that Ibn Taymiyyah would have been unable to write,” Foudah writes, “were it not that he relied upon the modes of fallacious reasoning mentioned and warned against by the logicians!”³² In yet another treatise by Foudah, he responds to the now infamous speech on the subject of faith and reason given by Pope Benedict XVI in September of 2006. The Pope offended many in the Muslim world by repeating a quote by a medieval Christian scholar that referred to the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad as “evil and inhumane” and being “spread by the sword.”³³ The global Muslim reaction included many civil diplomatic responses that expressed Muslim disappointment to his remarks and calls for dialogue, but there were also sporadic incidents of violence by angry mobs and extremists, including the murder of a Catholic nun in war-torn Somalia. Shaykh Foudah, however, devoted his treatise to the Pope’s remarks regarding Islam’s relationship with reason, stating: “The Pope wants to say that the view of the Church in regards to Allah is in conformity with reason, but

the view of Muslims with regards to this is contrary to reason! These are words which cause in us shock, laughter and bewilderment.”³⁴ Indeed, the Pope’s narrow characterization of Islam’s conception of God reflects only the Islam of the Atharis, and not at all the theological doctrines of the Ash‘arites and Maturidites. This point is not lost on Foudah, who laments the demise of theology and other rational sciences that once flourished in the Islamic world, stating:

Such are the times that they dare say their (incorrect) view is (in keeping with) reason, and then claim that the Muslims contradict reason. By Allah, this shows the degree that the Muslims have deteriorated. This is a man of highest position in their (Catholic) group and he has dared utter something like this. If the people of Islam were grounded in the foundations of their knowledge, as were the previous scholars of Islam from the *mutakallimin* [“theologians”] and *usuliyyin*, they would never have dared say such about Islam.³⁵

In a more recent treatise entitled “Modern Salafism and its Effect on Muslim Disunity,” Foudah notes the detrimental effects that Athari thought has had on the Muslim world. He also recounts a series of systematic refutations or polemics against Athari or “Salafi” beliefs, writing:

Let us now take a moment to focus on Wahhabite thought, or Taymite thought (i.e. the followers of Ibn Taymiyya) as I sometimes like to call it. Their view-point can be summed up in the following: the *Salaf* were upon the true creed and their affair remained for a while. Afterwards their occurred a disconnection and the innovators from other sects became dominant, and that has continued unabated till today—barring the specific time periods in which certain callers to their doctrine appeared. The most important of these callers, according to the Wahhabis, are Ibn Taymiyya and his student Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya . . . [But what they mention to you] are disconnected and disparate individuals in separate times and places; and this, in my view, is one of the biggest proofs demonstrating the falsehood of their ideas, beliefs, and rulings in which they oppose *Ahl al-Sunna wa’l-Jama’a* [i.e., Sunni Islam].³⁶

Foudah submitted the paper cited earlier to the annual conference of the International Islamic University of Malaysia in 2009. Hence, he is not only an Ash‘arite scholar engaged in nonviolent theological argumentation against Athari creedalism and radical Islamists, but, perhaps most importantly, he is making his ideas accessible through a range of mediums (e.g., websites, international conferences) and multiple languages. Perhaps if the efforts of Shaykh Foudah and Shaykh an-Ninowy are any indication of a growing trend in the Arab and Muslim world, there may be some hope for a revival of Sunni theology yet.

Ultimately, if Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, currently under the leadership of Mohammed Mahdi Akef, are allowed continued or expanded participation within democratic systems (relatively speaking), the challenges of governing over a complex illegible society will inevitably serve as a catalyst for certain theological developments as it did in the classical period of Islamic history. However, Islamic history has also shown that such a process is a long and difficult one, fraught with turmoil and bloodshed (as the world can already see). Drawing from the rich reservoir of Sunni theology, namely Ash‘arism, may help to lessen the difficulties of this critical and perpetual undertaking. But the task ahead is far from easy. The modest efforts of scholars such as Shaykh Foudah and Shaykh an-Ninowy may yet bear fruit in the years to come, but the world will have to wait patiently and see. Meanwhile, the “unthinkable” perseveres and staunchly protects its prisoners.

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Notes

Introduction

1. See Mohammed Arkoun, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought* (London: Saqi Books, 2002).
2. Wael B. Hallaq, *A History of Islamic Legal Theories: An Introduction to Sunni Usul al-Fiqh* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 59.
3. Quoted in Abdullahi A. Gallab, *The First Islamist Republic: Development and Disintegration of Islamism in the Sudan* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008), 7.
4. Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors: Thinking About Religion after 9/11* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 5.
5. Ibid, 6.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid, 7.
8. Mu'awiyah's reign as the first Umayyad caliph brought relative stability to the empire, but unresolved questions from the first *fitnah* ("trial") during the reign of 'Ali remained. After Mu'awiyah's death (680 CE) the Umayyads turned the caliphate into a hereditary monarchy with the designation of his son, Yazid (d. 683 CE), as his heir. During Yazid's reign, a second *fitnah* was initiated, unleashing further conflict throughout the provinces for the next twelve years. The violence and divisions of the second *fitnah* greatly exceeded that of the first, and involved further conflict with factions of Kharijites, Shi'ites, and the supporters of the rival caliphate of 'Abdallah ibn al-Zubayr (d. 692 CE) at Mecca. Among the many tragic events of this period, the most shocking was undoubtedly the death of the Prophet's grandson Husayn (who was hailed by the *Shi'ah* as the rightful *imam*) in 680 CE at the hands of Yazid's armies at Karbala. Another disturbing incident was the destruction of the sacred

Ka'aba in Mecca when it was besieged by al-Hajjaj ibn Yusuf, the lieutenant of the Umayyad caliph 'Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan (d. 705 CE). If the idea of the *ummah* of believers had survived the first *fitnah* at all, it was now in disarray. The general consensus (*ijma*) of the Muslim community and their common cause had formed the primary basis for Islamic norms and ideals, and more importantly the legitimacy of the Umayyad caliphate. But Umayyad rule had done little to maintain that cohesion or achieve the just and righteous order the community had long demanded. Quite apart from what we know of the Prophet Muhammad, the Umayyads envisioned Islam as an exclusive inheritance of the dominant, and essentially *Arab*, ruling class, reigning over the nations of nonbelievers. The Umayyad caliphate thus discouraged conversion among the subjugated peoples, and even when permitted the new converts were attached as clients to Arab tribes and typically forced to continue paying the *jizya* (the obligatory tribute tax on non-Muslim subjects) and barred from receiving equal shares of the booty during military campaigns. They also proclaimed Arabic the official administrative language of the empire to fend off the growing presence of Persian and other non-Arabic speakers. These policies generally continued until the reign of the very pious and popular, but somewhat inept, caliph 'Umar ibn 'Abdul-'Aziz (d. 720 CE), appointed in 717 CE. Subsequent Umayyad caliphs generally failed to follow 'Umar's example and reinstituted many of these policies until their overthrow during the 'Abbasid revolution of 750 CE.

Chapter 1

1. Wilfred Madelung, *Religious Schools and Sects in Medieval Islam* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1985), 166.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid, 167.
4. See Mas'ud ibn 'Umar al-Taftazani, *A Commentary on the Creed of Islam*, trans. Earl Edgar Edler (New York: Arno Press, 1980).
5. Ignaz Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*, trans. Andras and Ruth Hamori (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 95.
6. George Makdisi, "Ash'ari and the Ash'arites in Islamic Religious History I," *Studia Islamica*, no. 17 (1962): 40–52.
7. W. Montgomery Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology: An Extended Survey* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 1985), 67.

8. See Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 27, 133, 152.
9. Oliver Leaman, *An Introduction to Classical Islamic Philosophy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 161.
10. Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, vol. 3, trans. Franz Rosenthal (New York: Princeton University Press, 1958), 63–64.
11. Abu al-Ma'ali al-Juwayni, *A Guide to the Conclusive Proofs of Belief* (*Kitab al-Irshad ila Qawati al-Adilla fi Usul al-I'tiqad*), trans. Paul E. Walker (Reading, UK: Garnet Publishing, 2000), 57–74.
12. Muhammad ibn Abd al-Karim al-Shahrastani, *Muslim Sects and Divisions: The Section on Muslim Sects in Kitab al-Milal wa'l-Nihal*, trans. J.G. Flynn and A.K. Kazi (London: Kegan Paul International, 1984), 80.
13. Abu al-Qasim Abd al-Karim al-Qushayri, "Al-Fusul fi'l-Usul," trans. Richard M. Frank, in *Philosophy, Theology, and Mysticism in Medieval Islam: Texts and Studies on the Development and History of Kalam*, vol. 1, ed. Dimitri Gutas (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), 81.
14. Abu al-Qasim Abd al-Karim al-Qushayri, "Luma' fi'l-I'tiqad," trans. Richard M. Frank, in *Philosophy, Theology, and Mysticism in Medieval Islam: Texts and Studies on the Development and History of Kalam*, vol. 1, ed. Dimitri Gutas (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), 68.
15. Shahrastani, *Muslim Sects and Divisions*, 83.
16. Abu Bakr ibn al-Baqillani, *Kitab al-Tamhid*, ed. R.J. McCarthy (Beirut: Librairie Orientale, 1957), 286, as translated and reproduced in Tilman Nagel, *The History of Islamic Theology: From Muhammad to the Present*, trans. Thomas Thornton (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2000), 88–89.
17. Qushayri (*Al-Fusul*), 82.
18. Juwayni, *A Guide to the Conclusive Proofs*, 86.
19. Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *al-Kitab Qawa'id al-Aqa'id* (The Foundations of the Articles of Faith), trans. Nabih Amin Faris (Lahore: Kashmiri Bazar, 1974), 68–69.
20. Juwayni, *A Guide to the Conclusive Proofs*, 217.
21. Shahrastani, *Muslim Sects and Divisions*, 85.
22. Qushayri (*Al-Fusul*), 88–89.
23. Ghazali, *al-Kitab Qawa'id al-Aqa'id*, 100. For a comprehensive study of the concept of *tasdiq* in Sunni theology, see Wilfred C. Smith, "Faith as Tadiq," in *Islamic Philosophical Theology*, ed. Parviz Morewedge (New York: SUNY Press, 1979), 96–119.

24. Harry A. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 202–205.
25. Shahrastani, *Muslim Sects and Divisions*, 79–80.
26. Binyamin Abrahamov, *Islamic Theology: Traditionalism and Rationalism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 34–35.
27. Shahrastani, *Muslim Sects and Divisions*, 80.
28. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam*, 216.
29. Shahrastani, *Muslim Sects and Divisions*, 67–68.
30. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam*, 173–174.
31. Fathalla Kholeif, “Analysis of the Contents,” in Abu Mansur Muhammad al-Maturidi, *Kitab al-Tawhid* (Beirut: Librairie Orientale, 1986), xv.
32. Ibid.
33. Juwayni, *A Guide to the Conclusive Proofs*, 236–237.
34. Shahrastani, *Muslim Sects and Divisions*, 87.
35. Madelung, *Religious Schools and Sects*, 110.
36. Ibid., 111.
37. See Harry A. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976).
38. See Binyamin Abrahamov, *Islamic Theology: Traditionalism and Rationalism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998).
39. Wilfred Madelung, “al-Maturidi” in *The Encyclopedia of Islam: New Edition* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991), 846.
40. Wilfred Madelung, “al-Maturidiyya,” in *The Encyclopedia of Islam: New Edition* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991), 848.
41. Ibid., 847.
42. Madelung, *Religious Schools and Sects*, 122.
43. Ibid., 123.
44. Madelung, “al-Maturidi,” 846.
45. Abu Mansur Muhammad al-Maturidi, *Kitab al-Tawhid* (Beirut: Librairie Orientale, 1970), 10. Passage translated by Fathalla Kholeif in “Analysis of the Contents,” in Abu Mansur Muhammad al-Maturidi, *Kitab al-Tawhid* (Beirut: Librairie Orientale, 1986), xx.
46. Shahrastani, *Muslim Sects and Divisions*, 86–87.
47. Ibid., 86.
48. Maturidi, *Kitab al-Tawhid*, 59. Passage translated by Mustafa Ceriç, in *Roots of Synthetic Theology in Islam: A Study of the Theology of Abu Mansur al-Maturidi* (Kuala Lumpur: IISC, 1995), 186–187.
49. Abu Hafs ‘Umar al-Nasafi, *al-‘Aqa’id*, as reproduced in al-Taftazani, *A Commentary on the Creed of Islam*, 58.
50. Ceriç, *Roots of Synthetic Theology in Islam*, 184–187.
51. Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*, 100.

52. Kemal Pashazade, "The Disagreements Between the Ash'aris and Maturidis," trans. by Marifah.net (2009): 1.
53. Ibid., 2.
54. Ibid.; see footnote 5 of the cited document.
55. Maturidi, *Kitab al-Tawhid*, 226, trans. in Kholeif, "Analysis of the Contents," xxxiii.
56. J. Meric Pessagno, "Irada, Ikhtiya, Qudra, Kasb: The view of Abu Mansur al-Maturidi," in *The Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 104, no. 1 (Jan.–Mar., 1984): 182.
57. Madelung, "al-Maturidi," 847.
58. Maturidi, *Kitab al-Tawhid*, 217–218, trans. in Ceriç, *Roots of Synthetic Theology in Islam*, 218.
59. Madelung, "al-Maturidi," 846.
60. Ceriç, *Roots of Synthetic Theology in Islam*, 43.
61. Ibid., 181.
62. Ibid., 173, 181.
63. Maturidi, *Kitab al-Tawhid*, 41, trans. in Kholeif, "Analysis of the Contents," xxx.
64. Abu Hafs 'Umar al-Nasafi, *al-'Aqa'id*, as reproduced in al-Taftazani, *A Commentary on the Creed of Islam*, 74.
65. Kholeif, "Analysis of the Contents," xxxi.
66. The *Murji'a* or Murji'ites (i.e., the partisans of postponement) advocated the view that judgment over the status of a grave sinner, including the *imam*, should be deferred until the Day of Judgment. In a relatively short time, the idea of *irja'* gained increasing support, and its partisans extended their line of thinking to a broader range of theological concerns. Of particular importance was their understanding of *iman*, or faith, the very basis by which one defines who is (or is *not*) a believer (*Mu'min*) and thus a member of the community. In contrast to the Kharijite view, the *Murji'a* concluded that "disobedience with belief is not harmful just as obedience with disbelief is not beneficial." They argued that salvation was achieved by the sincerity of one's faith and love for God alone, regardless of one's deeds (even ritual duties), perhaps anticipating the later Christian theology of the German reformer, Martin Luther (d. 1546 CE), by some eight hundred years.
67. Ceriç, *Roots of Synthetic Theology in Islam*, 205.
68. Nasafi, 116.
69. See Taftazani, *A Commentary on the Creed of Islam*, 116–120.
70. See *ibid.*, 120–123.
71. Nasafi, 116.
72. Pessagno, "Irada, Ikhtiya, Qudra, Kasb," 181.

73. Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, 67–68.
74. Pessagno, “Irada, Ikhtiya, Qudra, Kasb,” 181.
75. Nasafi, 49.
76. Taftazani, *A Commentary on the Creed of Islam*, 70.
77. Ceriç, *Roots of Synthetic Theology in Islam*, 182.
78. Nasafi, 141.
79. Ibid.

Chapter 2

1. Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, vol. 3, trans. Franz Rosenthal (New York: Princeton University Press, 1958), 54.
2. See Merlin L. Swartz, *A Medieval Critique of Anthropomorphism: Ibn al-Jawzi’s Kitab Akhbār as-sifat: A Critical Edition of the Arabic Text with Translation, Introduction and Notes* (Leiden: Brill, 2002).
3. Ahmed Ibn Hanbal, *Usul ul-Sunnah* (“Foundations of the Sunnah”), trans. Anonymous (UK: Salafi Publications, 2003), 15–16.
4. ‘Abdallah al-Ansari al-Harawi, *Dhamm al-Kalam* (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr al-Lebnani, 1994), 11.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibn Qudama, *Censure of Speculative Theology: An Edition and Translation of Ibn Qudama’s Tahrīm an-Nazar fī Kutub Ahl al-Kalam with Introduction and Notes*, trans. and ed. George Makdisi (London: Luzac & Company Ltd, 1962), 11–12.
7. Ibid., 17.
8. In the United States, this creed has been translated into English and widely distributed by the Muslim Students Association as the “orthodox” Sunni creed.
9. W. Montgomery Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology: An Extended Survey* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 1985), 143.
10. Ibn Battutah, *Travels in Asia and Africa 1325–1354*, trans. and ed. H.A.R. Gibb (London: Broadway House, 1929), 67.
11. Ibn Qudama, *Censure of Speculative Theology*, 28.
12. Ibn Taymiyyah, *Al-‘Aqidah Al-Wasitiyyah*, trans. Assad Nimer Busool (Chicago: IQRA’ International Educational Foundation, 1992) [electronic copy—no page numbers].
13. Ibn Abi Ya’la, *Tabaqat al-Hanbalia*, ed. Muḥammad Hamid al-Faqi, vol. 1 (Cairo, 1952), 29, as reproduced in Tilman Nagel, *The History of Islamic Theology: From Muhammad to the Present*, trans. Thomas Thornton (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2000), 130.

14. Ibn Qudama, *Censure of Speculative Theology*, 9.
15. See Scott C. Lucas, *Constructive Critics, Hadith Literature, and the Articulation of Sunni Islam: The Legacy of the Generation of Ibn Sa'd, Ibn Ma'in, and Ibn Hanbal* (Leiden: Brill, 2004).
16. Yahya J. Michot, "A Mamluk Theologian's Commentary on Avicenna's *Risala Adhawiyya*: Being a Translation of a Part of *Dar al-Ta'arud* of Ibn Taymiyyah with Introduction, Annotation, and Appendices," *Journal of Islamic Studies*, vol. 14, no. 2 (2003): 165–166.
17. Watt, *Islamic Philosophy*, 100.
18. *Ibid.*, 100–101.
19. *Ibid.*, 101.
20. Wilfred Madelung, *Religious Schools and Sects in Medieval Islam* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1985), 112.
21. Mohammed Arkoun, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought* (London: Saqi Books, 2002), 13.
22. Watt, *Islamic Philosophy*, 101.
23. Madelung, *Religious Schools and Sects in Medieval Islam*, 114–115.
24. Watt, *Islamic Philosophy*, 103.
25. Josef van Ess, *The Flowering of Muslim Theology*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 4. See also Eleanor Abdella Doumato, "Saudi Arabia: From 'Wahhabi' Roots to Contemporary Revisionism," in *Teaching Islam: Textbooks and Religion in the Middle East*, eds. Eleanor Abdella Doumato and Gregory Starrett (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2007), 154–156.
26. Watt, *Islamic Philosophy*, 145–146.
27. Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, 53.
28. Fatima Mernissi, *Islam and Democracy: Fear of the Modern World*, trans. Mary Jo Lakeland (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1992), 27.
29. See, e.g., Michael A. Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1996).
30. Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1975), 244.
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 28. These include Mary (mother of Jesus), 'Asiya (called *Imratab Fir'aun* or "wife of Pharaoh"), Saul, al-Khidr, and Luqman. It should also be noted that the now defunct Sunni legal school known as the Zahiri school recognized Mary as a prophet; however, this opinion is not widely accepted.
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